

TERRORIST GROUPS IN SYRIA

HEARING

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON TERRORISM, NONPROLIFERATION, AND TRADE

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

ONE HUNDRED THIRTEENTH CONGRESS

FIRST SESSION

NOVEMBER 20, 2013

Serial No. 113-95

Printed for the use of the Committee on Foreign Affairs



Available via the World Wide Web: <http://www.foreignaffairs.house.gov/> or
<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/>

U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE

85-643PDF

WASHINGTON : 2014

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office
Internet: bookstore.gpo.gov Phone: toll free (866) 512-1800; DC area (202) 512-1800
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CONTENTS

	Page
WITNESSES	
Mr. Brian Michael Jenkins, senior adviser to the president, RAND Corporation	5
Mr. Phillip Smyth, Middle East research analyst, University of Maryland	17
Mr. Barak Barfi, research fellow, The New America Foundation	25
Mr. Andrew J. Tabler, senior fellow, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy	31
LETTERS, STATEMENTS, ETC., SUBMITTED FOR THE HEARING	
Mr. Brian Michael Jenkins: Prepared statement	7
Mr. Phillip Smyth: Prepared statement	18
Mr. Barak Barfi: Prepared statement	27
Mr. Andrew J. Tabler: Prepared statement	33
APPENDIX	
Hearing notice	48
Hearing minutes	49

TERRORIST GROUPS IN SYRIA

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2013

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TERRORISM, NONPROLIFERATION, AND TRADE,
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
Washington, DC.

The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 2 o'clock p.m., in room 2200 Rayburn House Office Building, Hon. Ted Poe (chairman of the subcommittee) presiding.

Mr. POE. The subcommittee will come to order. Without objection, all members may have 5 days to submit statements, questions and extraneous materials for the record subject to the length limitation and the rules. Ranking Member Sherman is momentarily delayed. He will be here and he will be recognized for his opening statement as soon as he arrives. I do want to thank everyone, especially the panelists, for waiting during the last series of votes. I appreciate your diligence and also appreciate you being here.

The crisis in Syria is a complicated mess. The poster in front here and once again on the screen, outlines to some extent the situation. At the very top of the poster, in yellow, is the Kurdish intrusion into what is Syria. The red portions are where the opposition, the rebels, all the rebel groups, different groups in different areas, but the red is the opposition controlling certain areas of Syria. The green is controlled by Assad. The vast majority of the land that is in white, that is uninhabited areas of Syria.

The butcher Assad has slaughtered countless innocent civilians and has used chemical weapons on his own people. Every day Syrians flee the country in thousands to escape the horror. Assad is supported by the Iranian regime and their Shia killers Hezbollah. Hezbollah is the main reason why Assad has remained in power. Without thousands of highly trained Hezbollah killers it is possible that the regime would have been toppled by now. The IRGC and Quds Force are actively propping up Assad to maintain Shia control of Syria and allow Iran to project its power across the region.

Aside from Hezbollah and Assad's armed forces, there are irregular militias called Shabihas that are loyal death squads for the regime. On the other side you have the Sunni fighters who range from so-called moderates to hard core extremists with ties to al-Qaeda. The worst of the lot is the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS, which is al-Qaeda. ISIS works closely with al-Qaeda in Iraq to create a safe haven from which they can conduct their reign of terror. ISIS numbers well into the thousands, and most of the for-

eign fighters who have come to Syria fight with ISIS. I will repeat that. The foreign fighters that come are those that fight with ISIS.

It isn't just the numbers that are important, it is what they are fighting for and how effective they are. ISIS sits at the top of the pyramid and then you have Jabhat al-Nusra, or JN, which is another jihadist group that shares al-Qaeda's ideas and objectives. Neither of these groups, in my opinion, are moderates. Both fund their operations from Gulf country donations, kidnappings, protection rackets, muscling in on the oil trade and other illegal means. Then there is another major Sunni group is Ahrar al-Sham, which many consider to be the strongest and most effective fighting force in several key cities. They may not be exactly al-Qaeda, but they are not exactly good folks either.

So the so-called moderates fight for the Supreme Military Command Council, or SMC. General Salim Idris is the leader of this group. If you recall, this is the same group that the State Department was saying that we should arm to topple Assad. These fighters were billed as moderates who would keep al-Qaeda from taking over, but over the last several months a large faction of the SMC has actually defected to the radical extremist. It is not even clear if the SMC actually has any control over its fighters on the ground. It has been said that these groups were never true secular nationalists but Islamics from varying degrees.

With so-called moderates fleeing into the arms of al-Qaeda, it seems that conflict has become a war between radical al-Qaeda affiliated extremists and a brutal dictator. It is hard for me to see a clear winner and one that the United States can support. We don't want the Iranians to dominate in Syria with their now puppet Assad, we also don't want al-Qaeda taking over the country and linking Syria with al-Qaeda presence in Iraq. Left with this impossible choice, it is hard to see how further U.S. involvement can change the situation for the better.

The regional implications of this conflict are important to understand and that is why we are here today. It is a possibility that Assad could be removed and then the rebel forces commit civil war against each other to see who is going to control the country. That is yet to be determined. Massive refugee flows are destabilizing our allies in the region and threaten to overwhelm large portions of their countries. I was recently in Turkey, and on the Syrian border with Turkey visited a refugee camp with over 150,000 Syrians who had fled the war and now are in Turkey. Refugees are in numerous countries around the area.

The fear of chemical weapons proliferation to terrorist groups is a possibility despite weapons inspectors trying to secure as many as they can. Radical foreign fighters who come to Syria to fight will eventually return home and may be motivated to launch attacks at the urging of al-Qaeda. We also know there are U.S. citizens who have traveled to Syria for jihad. We need to be on top of their travels and intentions so they don't come back and attack the United States. It is important for us to understand these groups that are active in Syria so we know not only who we are dealing with but what they plan to do and achieve in their objectives. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses.

I now turn over to my ranking member, Mr. Sherman from California, for 5 minutes for his opening statement.

Mr. SHERMAN. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding these hearings. The scale of violence in Syria is well known to all of us, 120,000 people have died. Iran and Hezbollah are providing money, men and munitions to the brutal Assad regime. Two explosions near the Iranian Embassy in Beirut appear to have killed 23 people including the Iranian cultural attache to Lebanon. A Sunni jihadist group said it was behind the attack, and this of course is not the first time that Sunni jihadists have carried out deadly attacks inside Hezbollah controlled areas in Lebanon. The bombing serves as an indicator of a major spillover from the Syrian conflict into Lebanon, and we don't have to be reminded what an ethnic and religious tinderbox Lebanon was from 1975 to 1990.

There are no excellent options involving Syria. Only the weaker part of the opposition shares with us a dedication to democracy, human rights or even a pale imitation thereof. But as reprehensible as some of the Sunni jihadists are, it is the Assad/Hezbollah/Tehran axis which is a greater threat to the United States and our interests than even the worst elements, I would say even the al-Qaeda elements of the opposition, though trying to choose from between very bad actors is certainly not something we prefer to do.

In March 2013 I joined with the ranking member of the full committee, Eliot Engel, and with the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence chairman, Mike Rogers, in introducing the Free Syria Act which would authorize and direct the President to provide appropriate assistance including limited lethal equipment to carefully vetted Syrian opposition members. Clearly, the number and organization and power of the good forces in Syria has declined vis-à-vis both the Assad regime and the Sunni jihadists, yet I still think that working with the reasonable elements of the opposition is the best of the bad choices available to us.

We see Jabhat al-Nusra, the ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, and the rapidly growing Ahrar al-Sham, or free men of the Levant, growing in power in Syria. We know that at least two of those groups have pledged their allegiance to al-Qaeda central, or perhaps we should call it al-Qaeda the franchisor, and the moderate rebel group, the Free Syrian Army, has been losing fighters and capacities to the hard core extremists. If we have to reflect on how brutal those extremists are, we can see a video that apparently they posted on YouTube showing themselves killing truck drivers in Iraq simply because these gentlemen were Alawites and were unable to successfully pretend to be Sunnis.

The al-Qaeda affiliated groups have brought bomb making and other war fighting capacities to the Syrian civil war. They have recruited young men into their ranks, and they are instilling extremist views. The Saudis and others of our friends in the Gulf are deeply frustrated of the administration's lack of ample lethal aid, even nonlethal aid to the Syrian rebels, but our friends in the Gulf are a little less concerned about dedication to human rights or even to peace between nations when they decide which groups in Syria to support.

Tens of thousands of Hezbollah members fight along Assad, all with the support of an Iranian Government, and all with the Iraqi

Government that we created allowing planes to go over its territory carrying IRGC to Damascus. I could go on, but I should yield back and I do.

Mr. POE. I thank the ranking member. Are there other members that wish to be recognized for opening statements? The chair will recognize the vice chair of this committee, Mr. Kinzinger, for 1 minute.

Mr. KINZINGER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to the witnesses who have come in today. The ongoing conflict in Syria has rapidly evolved into a historic holy war between Sunnis and Shiites. This has left us with an atrocity of well over 115,000 dead, and a conservative estimate of 2.24 million refugees and IDPs.

I supported President Obama earlier this year in limited U.S. military strikes as a punishment for chemical weapons use, but in solving a larger crisis the simple fact is we waited too long. We waited too long to exert U.S. influence in the region, thus creating a power vacuum and leaving open the door for al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, Iran and Russia to fill this void. All groups that I certainly do not want to exert more influence in the Middle East.

I am not fully sure what the answer is and I look forward to hearing what the panel suggests. But what I do know is if the U.S. continues to sit on the sidelines and present ourselves as an unreliable partner in the Middle East, we will lose significant influence in the region and the world. I look forward to the testimonies of the witnesses, and I yield back.

Mr. POE. Thank you, gentlemen. I will introduce the witnesses at this time. We have several good witnesses for us today. Mr. Brian Michael Jenkins is a senior advisor to the president of the RAND Corporation, author of numerous books, reports and articles on terrorism related topics. He formerly served as chair of the political science department at RAND. Phillip Smyth is a Middle East analyst at the University of Maryland's Laboratory for Cultural Dynamics where he focuses on Lebanese, Hezbollah and other regional Iranian Shia proxies. He was formerly an American based research fellow at the GLORIA Center.

Mr. Barfi is a research fellow at the New America Foundation where he specializes in Arab and Islamic affairs. Previously, Barak was a visiting fellow at the Brookings Institution. Mr. Andrew Tabler is a senior fellow in the program on Arab Politics at the Washington Institute, where he focuses on Syria and U.S. policy in the Levant. During 14 years of residence in the Middle East, Mr. Tabler served most recently as a consultant on U.S.-Syria relations for the International Crisis Group, and a fellow at the Institute of Current World Affairs.

Without objection, all the witnesses' prepared statements will be made a part of the record. I ask that each witness keep your presentation to no more than 5 minutes. There is a clock in front of you somewhere. When you see the yellow light come on that tells you you have 1 minute, and the red means your 5 minutes are up. I will start with Mr. Jenkins.

**STATEMENT OF MR. BRIAN MICHAEL JENKINS, SENIOR
ADVISER TO THE PRESIDENT, RAND CORPORATION**

Mr. JENKINS. Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Sherman, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify. Let me start with the assertion that other than as a scrap of color on a map, Syria has ceased to exist. For the foreseeable future, no government will be able to rule the entire country. With support from Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, Syrian Government forces appear to have stalemated a fragmented rebel movement. Rebel forces do control large areas of the country where government forces have withdrawn, but even if Assad falls, they too will be unable to impose their authority throughout Syria. Moreover, as you pointed out in your opening statements, the growing role of jihadist elements has divided the rebel movement and discouraged Western governments from providing the rebels with significant military support.

It is against this background that the committee has asked me to address the role of Sunni and Shia terrorism. On the Sunni side, Syria represents al-Qaeda's best chance of establishing a new base in the Middle East from which to continue its terrorist campaign against the West. Two groups are directly linked to al-Qaeda—the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL—or ISIS, using the term Sham instead of the Levant—and Jabhat al-Nusra. Through its ferocity on the battlefield and dramatic suicide bombings, al-Nusra has attracted financial support and recruits to become what many regard as the most effective rebel force. ISIS, or ISIL, is simply the latest incarnation of the al-Qaeda in Iraq that emerged after the American invasion.

Since the American withdrawal, the group has continued its terrorist campaign in Iraq while expanding its area of operations to include Syria. I should point out here just briefly that Sham, the last word in the title, implies something much broader than modern-day Syria. It is something that encompasses Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and of course Israel. So this is a much broader assertion of a theater. The rebel forces have attracted between 6,000 and 8,000 foreign fighters. Most of them come from Arab countries, but an estimated 500 or so come from Western countries.

These numbers will increase as the fighting continues. Europe, especially, is worried about what may happen when these fighters return home, possibly to engage in terrorist activities. It is not an immediate problem, as the flow of recruits right now is toward Syria, not the other way. However, arriving volunteers could be recruited by al-Qaeda operatives to carry out terrorist operations in the West. We have to recall that Muhammad Atta originally came to fight in Afghanistan but was then recruited by al-Qaeda and turned around to lead the 9/11 operation. Insofar as we know, comparatively few of these foreign fighters have come from the United States. Some have, but the chatter on the social media certainly indicates aspirations for others to go.

Hezbollah represents the Shia side of terrorism, although Hezbollah's forces in Syria are fighting a more conventional war, bolstering a regime that is worried about the loyalty of its Sunni troops. Hezbollah is also training the militias that will bear an increasing portion of the fighting. In my view, terrorism certainly

will be a growing feature of the Syrian conflict. The rebels are able to take smaller towns, infiltrate larger cities, and carry out spectacular terrorist attacks. But as these enclaves are consolidated—as what we might refer to as the front lines become harder—terrorism will become the rebels' principal weapon.

On the other side, the Syrian Government's approach to counter-insurgency is essentially a strategy of terror. It is marked by intensive aerial and artillery bombardment, razing entire neighborhoods and towns, deliberately targeting the civilian population in the rebel zones. This style of fighting serves the dual purpose of terrorizing supporters of the rebels while binding Assad's forces to the regime. Local militias are now probably Syria's best weapons of mass destruction. Backed by the conventional forces of the Syrian armed forces, they root out rebel fighters and they carry out ethnic cleansing.

As national institutions are warned away by the continuing conflict, the militias are going to become the primary protectors of the regime's enclaves. This has implications for any future foreign military intervention. You mentioned the refugees. About a third of Syria's population has either fled the country or been displaced internally. According to U.N. estimates, by the end of 2014, more than half of Syria's population will be living as refugees, a situation conducive to future terrorism. So what began as a rebellion against the regime of Bashar al-Assad has become a sectarian war that has exacerbated the sectarian tensions in Iraq and Lebanon, as well as in Syria, and increases the likelihood of a wider regional conflict that will affect diaspora communities as well. One way or another, we will be dealing with the effluent of Syria's conflict for decades. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Jenkins follows:]

The Role of Terrorism and Terror in Syria's Civil War

Brian Michael Jenkins

RAND Office of External Affairs

CT-402

November 2013

Testimony presented before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade on November 20, 2013

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Published 2013 by the RAND Corporation
1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138
1200 South Hayes Street, Arlington, VA 22202-5050
4570 Fifth Avenue, Suite 600, Pittsburgh, PA 15213-2665
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Brian Michael Jenkins¹
The RAND Corporation

The Role of Terrorism and Terror in Syria's Civil War²

**Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs
 Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade
 United States House of Representatives**

November 20, 2013

Chairman Poe, Ranking Member Sherman, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify at this hearing, "Terrorist Groups in Syria".

Other than as a scrap of color on a map, Syria has ceased to exist—no government will be able to rule all of modern Syria in the foreseeable future.

- Syria's civil war is about whether Bashar al-Assad will continue to lead Syria's government, but the war also reflects broader sectarian undercurrents that divide the country and the region.
- After 35 months of fighting, of a population of approximately 22 million, more than 100,000 people have died in the conflict; an estimated 2.2 million have fled abroad, while another 4.5 million have been displaced internally. The United Nations anticipates that, with continued fighting, by the end of 2014, more than half of Syria's population could be living as refugees.³ These are circumstances conducive to future terrorism.
- With the support of Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, Syrian government forces appear to have stalemated a fragmented rebel movement. But Assad is unlikely to be able to restore his authority throughout the country.

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² This testimony is available for free download at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT402.html>.

³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Syria Regional Refugee Response*, November 17, 2013, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>, and United Nations, Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, *No Country for Syria's IDPs*, July 19, 2013, <http://www.wfp.org/content/no-country-syrias-idps>.

- Rebel forces nominally control large areas of the country where government forces have withdrawn, but even if Assad falls, they too will be unable to impose their authority throughout Syria.
- While the rebellion has grown to a force of more than 100,000, it mirrors many of the divisions of the broader Muslim world.
- Moreover, the growing role of jihadist elements, with their numbers increasing through the recruitment of foreign fighters and defections from other rebel groups, has divided the rebel movement and discouraged anti-Assad governments in the West from providing significant military support.

It is against this background that the committee has asked me to address the role of Sunni and Shia terrorism in Syria. We will first look at al Qaeda's affiliates in Syria, then we will examine the role played by Hezbollah. This will be followed by a broader discussion of how terror has become a dominant feature of Syria's civil war, which will deepen sectarian tensions throughout the region.

AL QAEDA'S AFFILIATES

In the Sunni camp are the groups linked to al Qaeda—the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Jabhat al-Nusrah, both of which are regarded by the United States and others as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs).⁴

Jabhat al-Nusrah took the field in January 2012, a year after the first protests against the regime began. Through its ferocity on the battlefield and dramatic suicide bombings, the group has attracted support and recruits to become what many regard as the most effective rebel force.

ISIL is the latest incarnation of al Qaeda in Iraq or the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), which emerged after the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Since the American withdrawal, ISI has continued its terrorist campaign against the Iraqi government while expanding its area of operations to include Syria. This led to the adoption of its current name. ISIL's use of the term "Levant," or "Sham" in Arabic, encompasses not only the modern state of Syria but also Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and, of course, Israel.

⁴ Earlier comments on the terrorist threat from Syria can be found in Seth G. Jones, *The Terrorist Threat from Syria*, "Testimony before the Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, May 22, 2013, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2013.

In April 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISI, asserted that the adoption of ISI's new name reflected the merger of ISI and Jabhat al-Nusrah, which he claimed had been created and financed by ISI. Al-Nusrah's leader Abu Mohammad al-Jawlan, while affirming his loyalty to al-Qaeda and acknowledging ISI's past assistance, responded that there was no such merger. Al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri supported al-Nusrah's independence, but al-Baghdadi rejected Zawahiri's decision. The dispute reflects a divisive tendency in al-Qaeda, especially as it creates new affiliates.

Al-Qaeda affiliates and hardline Salafists not linked to al-Qaeda comprise anywhere from 25 to nearly 50 percent of the rebel forces—there is disagreement about the numbers. One must be cautious here. The rebel “army” comprises more than a thousand independent units. These are grouped into larger entities on the basis of beliefs and nominal loyalty to one or another of the major factions of the rebellion, but their numbers and loyalties are fluid. Groups coalesce and divide. Individual leaders split off to form new groups. Rebel fighters transfer their loyalty from one group to another. Given the dynamic situation, assessments have short lives. An order of battle for the rebels would last a day.

Similarly, parsing terrorist attacks from the high volume of violence generated by Syria's civil war is nearly impossible. Major car bombings and the assassinations of important officials can be discerned, but much of the violence that one could objectively qualify as terrorism is lost in the din of war. The University of Maryland's START database counts 175 terrorist attacks in Syria in 2012 with 889 deaths, admittedly a conservative number.⁵ The percentage of the 100,000 people who have died in the war who were killed in terrorist attacks, or by whom, we cannot say.

For now, it appears that the jihadists have become the cutting edge of the rebellion. Some attribute this to the considerable foreign support they are receiving, in contrast to the cautious support the more secular rebels are receiving from the West. Others attribute the jihadists' ferocity to their ideological fervor, while there are those who assert that the Western news media, eager for gruesome stories of jihadist atrocities but unable to check facts, are exaggerating the importance of the jihadists. It is hard to make an overall judgment.

Right now, Syria represents al-Qaeda's best chance of proving its continuing relevance and establishing a new base in the Middle East. The longer the fighting continues, the greater the fear in surrounding countries and the West that al-Qaeda-inspired elements will be able to consolidate

⁵ Data for 2012 provided to the author by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism (START), University of Maryland.

their position, giving them a new stronghold from which to continue terrorist operations against the West.

Terrorist tactics are clearly part of the rebels' repertoire in Syria, but both ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra are also behaving a lot like classic guerrillas. They are reportedly running schools and providing social assistance to people in areas under their control—these are the embryos of governance. Indoctrination is part of the program, but civic action can also be a response to the Syrian government tactics of deliberately destroying food supplies, medical services, and all economic activity in rebel-held areas.

Although al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula adopted a similar role in Yemen, this is new territory for al Qaeda, whose fanaticism usually has managed to alienate populations under its temporary rule. Al Qaeda's central leadership and its affiliates in Syria may share the long-term objective of implementing Sharia worldwide, but there is an inherent tension between a religiously inspired revolutionary vanguard of a global terrorist enterprise and a local insurgency that must try hold the loyalty of the local population.

It is possible that future al Qaeda fronts will follow the path of Hamas and Hezbollah, becoming complex political enterprises rather than purely terrorist organizations. In some ways, that could make them more difficult to counter; however, it also opens up new possibilities. Might local jihadists be weaned from al Qaeda's global terrorist campaign? History suggests otherwise.

Almost none of al Qaeda's affiliates have remained local. The organization's central leadership demands adherence to its strategic line. Local affiliates attract foreign fighters who have little interest beyond fighting, and hardliners come to dominate the leadership. Attacks on the leadership and setbacks in the field caused by foreign military intervention provoke retaliation.

Foreign jihadists are causing concern. The rebel forces have attracted between 6,000 and 8,000 foreign fighters, most of them from Arab countries. There are reportedly a large number of Chechens, and volunteers from Pakistan are also said to be showing up. An estimated 500 come from Western countries, mainly the United Kingdom and France. These numbers will no doubt increase as the fighting continues.

Some of the jihadists are determined to fight, but others seem to be little more than jihadi tourists who stay out of harm's way while taking photos of themselves and boasting to their friends back home on social media. Many of the foreign fighters join Jabhat al-Nusra, but with ISIL in the

ascendancy in the eyes of jihadists internationally, they now may be moving toward that organization.

Europe is worried about what may happen when these fighters, some with military skills and combat experience, return home and possibly engage in terrorist activities. Because of their proximity and volume, Syria's foreign fighters are viewed as posing a much larger problem than that posed by the previous generation of veterans returning from Afghanistan.

Right now, some in Europe may not view the lure of Syria's civil war for jihadists as a bad thing, as it may be drawing off some of the hotheads who otherwise would cause trouble at home. Moreover, Syria's jihadist groups may not be looking for a fight with Western countries, which are also opposed to Assad. This attitude could change if the West or Western-backed rebels move against the jihadists during a post-Assad civil war.

This is not an immediate problem, as the flow of recruits is toward Syria, not the other way. However, al Qaeda operatives may recruit individuals from the pool of arriving volunteers to carry out terrorist operations in the West. Recall that Muhammad Atta originally came to fight in Afghanistan but was recruited by al Qaeda to lead the 9/11 operation.

Insofar as we know, relatively few of these foreign fighters have come from the United States, but the chatter on social media indicates aspirations.

HEZBOLLAH

Hezbollah, also designated as an FTO, represents the Shia side. Hezbollah is a hybrid organization. It operates profitable criminal enterprises, while it also runs schools and provides Lebanon's Shia community with various forms of social assistance. Elected officials from its political arm participate in Lebanon's government. Hezbollah fields its own large paramilitary force, which is considered more powerful than the armed forces of Lebanon, and has engaged in open battle against Israeli forces. It is a state within a state.

Hezbollah also continues to conduct terrorist operations. In 2012, its operatives were responsible for terrorist plots and attacks on Israeli targets in Europe. These attacks coincided with an Iranian-orchestrated campaign of terrorist attacks on Israeli targets worldwide. Hezbollah was a creation of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, and Iran remains its major source of funds and supplier of weapons.

Supporting its alliance with Iran and Syria and protecting its supply routes through Syria was what led Hezbollah to openly intervene in Syria's civil war. Hezbollah's fighters came to Syria not to carry out terrorist operations but to fight as conventional forces.

Several thousand Hezbollah troops fight alongside Syrian government forces. The organization provides experienced veterans to a regime that is worried about the loyalty of its Sunni troops. Utilizing their experience in urban warfare, Hezbollah veterans played a critical role in wresting the important town of Qusayr from the rebels. Hezbollah, along with Iran, also appears to be playing an important role in training the militias that will bear an increasing portion of the fighting.

Hezbollah's involvement has come at a cost. Once widely admired by Sunnis and Shias alike for its resistance to Israel, Hezbollah's intervention in Syria makes it a strictly Shia force. Its involvement in Syria has provoked increasingly bellicose rhetoric from al Qaeda, which considers all Shia to be heretics.⁶ Recent bombings of Shia targets in Lebanon, most likely the work of Sunni extremists, have increased tensions.

According to some public reports, Hezbollah is currently withdrawing some of its forces from Syria, but whether this is true and, if so, why, is unclear.

THE ROLE OF TERROR IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

The discussion of terrorism in Syria ought not to be confined to an administratively ordained order of battle. The emergence of contemporary international terrorism in the late 1960s prompted an international effort aimed at preventing terrorist tactics from becoming a mode of political expression or a legitimate component of armed conflict. This effort achieved a measure of success in reducing some terrorist tactics, but the fact is that terrorism has become a component of contemporary warfare, and I suspect that terrorism will be a growing feature of the Syrian conflict.

The rebels cannot seem to make the transition from a resistance movement to a field force capable of challenging the government's forces on the battlefield. For the time being, the rebels are able to take and hold smaller towns. They can infiltrate the periphery of larger cities, forcing the government to use its airpower and heavy weapons to drive them out, thereby causing heavy civilian casualties and collateral damage. The rebels can carry out spectacular terrorist attacks, principally large-scale bombings, to gain attention and demonstrate that the government cannot

⁶ In a message posted on July 31, 2013, Zawahiri denounced Hezbollah as a tool of Iranian Shi'ite expansionism.

guarantee security, hoping that these actions will create an untenable situation that eventually brings about a change of regime from within or provokes intervention from abroad. With less concern about tactics that offend Western sensitivities, jihadists thrive in this kind of warfare.

On the other side, the Syrian government's approach to counterinsurgency is informed by its own historical experience in suppressing Muslim revolts and by Soviet/Russian doctrine as displayed in the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya. It is a strategy of terror characterized by the static defense of major population centers and strategic lines of communication in Syria; this will translate into the defense of Damascus, Aleppo, and other large cities, ethnically friendly enclaves, and the major highways that connect them.

Offensive operations are marked by intensive aerial and artillery bombardment, razing entire neighborhoods and towns, the deliberate targeting of bakeries (an important component of food production) and hospitals, and the destruction of commerce in rebel-held zones. These brutal tactics serve the dual purpose of terrorizing supporters of the rebels and binding Assad's forces to the regime by making them accomplices in actions that foreclose any other future for them. Local militias, backed by airpower and armored units, root out rebel fighters and carry out ethnic cleansing. They are the now Syria's "weapons of mass destruction." These tactics generate civilian casualties and vast numbers of refugees. Over time, the Syrian army will cease to be a national institution, while militias will become the primary protectors and enforcers of the regime.

This has implications for any future foreign military intervention. Neutralizing Syria's armed forces will not end the fighting. Nor will there be any national army to subsequently maintain order—war crimes will make what remnants survive undesirable allies. Instead, the occupying forces will have to confront a host of autonomous military formations and criminal groups, defeating and disarming them piecemeal while providing protection to local communities until new security institutions are created.

AN INCREASINGLY SECTARIAN WAR

What began as a rebellion against the regime of Bashar al-Assad has become a sectarian civil war. The same underlying tensions were on display during the war in Iraq, but Syria represents a much more complex mosaic of Sunnis, Shias, Alawites (a Shia sect), Christians, Druze, Kurds, and others. As national institutions are worn away, self-defense and survival are increasingly based on ethnic and sectarian identities.

These fault lines cut across the lines in the sand drawn by colonial powers nearly a century ago. Syria's civil war already has exacerbated sectarian tensions in Iraq and Lebanon, and it increases the likelihood of a wider regional conflict, with growing sectarianism affecting diaspora communities as well. As in Syria, a wider regional conflict will have many layers—Sunni versus Shia; Jihadists versus existing regimes, whether secular, Shia, or conservative monarchies; Iran versus Jordan, Turkey, the Gulf kingdoms; even a renewal of Cold War competition. In one way or another, we will be dealing with the effluent of Syria's conflict for years to come

Mr. POE. Thank you. Mr. Smyth, the chair recognizes you for 5 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF MR. PHILLIP SMYTH, MIDDLE EAST
RESEARCH ANALYST, UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND**

Mr. SMYTH. Chairman Poe and Ranking Minority Member Sherman, thank you for the opportunity to be able to speak to the subcommittee. As Syria continues to burn and the United States attempts to both assess its interests and protect our existing interests, there is a major player in its proxies which are often misunderstood and also receive less attention.

In early March 2013, British Foreign Minister William Hague said and I quote, "Syria today has become the top destination for jihadists." The jihadists he was referring to are Sunni Islamists fighting as part of a number of Syrian rebel groups. However, an often overlooked, growing, well organized and highly militarily capable jihadist element within Syria is not only pro-Assad, but it is also Shia Islamist in nature, in addition to being backed and run by Iran. Shia jihadis, their movements and the narratives they utilize are highly developed and form part of a larger Iranian regional strategy.

Tehran's main regional proxies which believe in, promote, and project Iran's "Islamic Revolutionary" ideology are the main contributors of Shia fighters through Syria. The proxy groups sending combatants include Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraq's Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, the Badr Organization, Kata'ib Hezbollah, and smaller Iranian backed splinters from Iraqi Shia radical leader, Muqtada al-Sadr. Announcing its existence in May, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada—this is another Iraq-based Iranian client organization—claims to have sent some 500 fighters to Syria, and they are quite brutal.

Starting in mid-October, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq publicly called for Iraqi Shia volunteers to join the organization's fight in Syria. For months prior there have also been reports of trained volunteer fighters who had joined Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and they were then trained in Iran or Lebanon in Hezbollah's training camps and were then flown to Syria. Some of the combatants have included the Shia from as far afield as Saudi Arabia, Cote d'Ivoire and even Afghanistan.

These Shia elements have constituted a key element which has secured and provided a powerful kinetic force to keep the Assad regime in power. According to one Lebanese Hezbollah fighter who was interviewed by Time magazine, and this is a great quote, "If we don't defend the Syrian regime it would fall within 2 hours."

Without the initial push by Iran and the utilization of its proxy network, Shia armed involvement via the deployment of volunteer fighters and trained assets would have likely constituted a very limited effect on the battlefield. It is also probable that without Iran's regional network of Shia Islamist fighters, the Assad regime would have been unable to mount any of its most recent offensives. Now all these factors are contributing to a hypersectarianization of the conflict. To quote an Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq singer—yes, they have propaganda singers. His name is Ali al-Delfi. "We are not simply fighting for Bashar, we fight for Shiism." Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Smyth follows:]

Testimony of Mr. Phillip Smyth, Research Analyst at the University of Maryland – Laboratory for Computational Cultural Dynamics, House Committee Foreign Affairs Committee – Subcommittee On Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, November 20, 2013, Hearing: Terrorist Groups in Syria

Chairman Royce and Ranking Minority Member Sherman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee. As Syria continues to burn and the United States attempts to both assess its interests and protect our existing interests, there is a major player and its proxies which are often misunderstood and receive less attention.

In early March 2013, British Foreign Minister William Hague said, “Syria today has become the top destination for jihadists”. The jihadists he was referring to were Sunni Islamists fighting as part of a number of Syrian rebel units. However, an often overlooked, growing, well-organized, and highly militarily capable jihadist element within Syria is not only pro-Assad, but is also Shi’a Islamist in nature, in addition to being backed and run by Iran. Shi’a jihadis, their movements, and the narratives they utilize are highly developed and form part of a larger Iranian regional strategy.

Tehran’s main regional proxies which believe in, promote, and project Iran’s “Islamic Revolutionary” ideology are the main contributors of Shi’a fighters to Syria. The proxy groups sending combatants include Lebanese Hizballah, Iraq’s Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, the Badr Organization, Kata’ib Hizballah, and other smaller splinters from Iraqi Shi’a radical leader, Muqtada al-Sadr. Announcing its existence in May, Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, another Iraq-based Iranian-proxy organization, claims to have sent 500 fighters to Syria. Starting in mid-October, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq publicly called for Iraqi Shi’a volunteers to join the organization’s fight in Syria. For months prior there had been reports of trained volunteer fighters who had joined Kata’ib Hizballah or Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, were trained in Iran or Lebanon, and were then flown to Syria. Some of the combatants have included Shi’a from as far afield as Saudi Arabia, Côte d’Ivoire, and reportedly Afghanistan.

These Shi’a elements have constituted a key element which has secured and has provided a powerful kinetic force to keep the Assad regime in power. According to one Lebanese Hizballah fighter interviewed by Time Magazine, “If we don’t defend the Syrian regime, it would fall within two hours”.

Without the initial push by Iran and the utilization of its proxy-network, Shi’a armed involvement via the deployment of volunteer fighters and trained assets would likely have had miniscule role in the fighting. It is also probable that without Iran’s regional network of Shi’a Islamist fighters, the Assad regime would have been unable to mount most of its successful recent offensives.

What Motivates the Shi’a Jihadist?

Iran’s overarching influence and control of Shia militia activity in Syria is undeniable and pervasive. The numerous Shi’a groups fighting in Syria rarely hide their loyalty to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The majority of these fighters adhere to the Iranian political and religious ideology of Wilayat al-Faqih, or the Absolute Guardianship of the Jurisprudent (in this case, the jurist is Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei). Despite the fact that Khamenei is the head of state of Iran, he wields incredible influence over a multitude of organizations and individuals in different geographic zones due to his religious title and connected ideology. In fact, the revolutionary ideology of Iran was not simply created for just that state, but is global and pan-Islamic. When Khamenei gives an order to a loyal follower, they act.

According to one Lebanese Hizballah fighter, the group's order to fight in the May-June 2013 battle of Qusayr and in other parts of Syria came from a direct religious command called a taklif shar'i. A taklif shar'i, comes from Iran's Supreme Leader and is a religious obligation which must be followed. If this obligation is not followed, it is tantamount to disobeying the will of God. The fact that a taklif shar'i was issued was also uncovered when a video leaked of Hizballah and possibly other allied Iraqi Shia Islamist militants executing captured Syrians. One of the fighters said, "We are performing our taklif and we are not seeking personal vengeance." Thus far, a publically accessible copy of the taklif shar'i is unavailable. Nevertheless, this follows a general trend, since many religious edicts are not published. Instead, at times, they are conveyed via networks of loyal clerics and military leaders which adhere to the concepts of Wilayat al-Faqih.

The war has also not been marketed to Shi'a in the Middle East and worldwide as one to defend the Assad regime. Instead, the narrative has been one of "defending shrines", namely the Sayyida Zaynab Shrine in southern Damascus. Lebanese Hizballah and Iran's other Iraqi Shi'a Islamist proxies have also claimed their roles in Syria are to protect their host countries from Sunni Islamist radicals they have branded as, "Takfiris". Starting in August, their war-narratives took on a far more sectarian tone and the collective of Iranian-backed Shi'a Islamist organizations have now started to openly refer to themselves as a "Shi'a Resistance". This stands in stark contrast when juxtaposed to the more normative and ideologically sound (in terms of Iranian Islamic Revolutionary ideology), "Islamic Resistance". Widely shared musical propaganda for Iran's Iraqi-Shi'a proxies and for Lebanese Hizballah has also adopted a more sectarian tone.

A World of Front Militias

Iranian-backed Shi'a Islamist organizations operating in Syria continue to be announced. During the summer, 3 separate Syrian-based militias were announced in a 3-week period. Militia organizations announced as operating in Syria should generally be considered as front organizations for other Iranian-backed groups based in Iran, Iraq, or Lebanon. The creation of a multitude of front groups resembles earlier efforts by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps when they created proxy forces to project their power in the region. In the 1980s the early Lebanese Hizballah often utilized many different front names when it carried out operations. During the Iraq War (2003), "Special Groups" created by Iran would also go by many different names depending on their areas of operation. This is not simply done to create plausible deniability, but to make the force sizes appear larger (to their enemies and potential supporters) and to confuse enemy forces. In Syria, there has been a lot of overlap in terms of membership for Syria-based front groups and the forces which have supplied them with fighters.

The majority of Shi'a jihadist combatants primarily originate from Iraq and Lebanon. However, there have been Shi'a from around the world which have fought and died in Syria. In June, Saudi Shi'a Ahmed Adnan al-Qar'oush, was reported to have been killed fighting in Syria. Extensive Lebanese Hizballah and Iranian presences in West Africa has also supplied sub-Saharan African fighters. On July 26, 2013, the "First African martyr", Muhammed Suleiman al-Kuwni was reported in Iranian media.

- *Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF)*: The IRGC-QF has been instrumental in every major overseas operation executed by Iran. Answering directly to Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, IRGC-QF's commander, Qassem Suleimani has gone about reforming and retraining Iraqi and Lebanese Shi'a fighting units in order to make them

more unified bodies. Overall, the IRGC-QF along with Lebanese Hizballah maintain key leadership roles in relation to the Shi'a Islamist forces on the ground in Syria. There have been many estimates of the IRGC's presence in Syria and it is likely their number runs into the thousands.

- *Lebanese Hizballah*: According to French intelligence, Lebanese Hizballah has anywhere from 3,000-4000 fighters inside Lebanon. Many of these fighters serve in Syria through different rotational periods. Often, they function as "core-forces", which means they provide a well-trained, motivated, and equipped core for the Syrian army and the primarily Iraqi Shi'a staffed militias in Syria. Hizballah has launched its own major operations in cooperation with elements from the Syrian Army. The most prominent was during the May-June Battle of Qusayr and in the developing Battle for Qalamoun. Lebanese Hizballah has also worked many joint operations with front-militias staffed primarily by Iraqi Shi'a fighters within Syria. One operation in December 2012-February 2013 took control of the road and areas leading to Damascus Airport. Lebanese Hizballah generally operates under its own name while fighting in Syria. Nevertheless, the group has supplied fighters to other Shi'a Islamist front militias. In part, Lebanese Hizballah had developed a good rapport with its allied Iraqi Shi'a Islamist organizations due to combat experience during the Iraq War (2003) and because Iranian leadership and trainers often lacked Arabic language skills. Thus, the IRGC-QF has used Lebanese Hizballah as an important middleman and chief conduit to command other loyal elements.
- *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH)*: Created by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in cooperation with Lebanese Hizballah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq began life as a splinter from Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army. The group claimed responsibility. In September, the group threatened to attack U.S. interests if the U.S. struck Syria. It is claimed via social media sites and through their funeral ceremonies that their units in Syria operate under the name of *Liwa' Kafeel Zaynab* (Sponsors of Zaynab Brigade). In October, the group moved from recruiting Shi'a volunteers via word of mouth and local recruiters to a phone and social network-based approach. It is unknown how many fighters AAH has contributed. Though, it has been reported that its combatants are well trained and exhibit superior command skills when compared to their Syrian allies.
- *Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS or The Master of the Martyrs Brigades)*: This Iraqi group claims its reason for being is to protect "shrines across the globe". KSS has also mentioned that Israel is "Cancerous", the U.S. occupation of Iraq was a symbol of "Arrogance" (a regularly-used Iranian Revolutionary term to describe actions of Western states), and called for Jerusalem to be liberated. Though, it is clear from the group's symbolism (which features the dome to the Sayyida Zaynab shrine) and that they have not been deployed outside of Syria, that their main purpose may be to function as a Syria-centric fighting group. Unlike fighters from other Iranian-backed organizations, KSS fighters do not appear to operate as part of other Syrian front militias and openly fight under the KSS banner. KSS does not hide its affinity for the Iranian Revolutionary ideology or for Ayatollah Khamenei. Most of the group's martyrdom posters include Khamenei and fighters killed fighting for the group are flown to Iran before burial in Iraq. Some of the group's fighters were killed in East Ghouta by rebel elements and a large quantity of material praising Lebanese Hizballah leader, Imad Mughniyeh and the Iranian Supreme

Leader was found on their bodies. KSS's fighters were also part of an October-November offensive which took sections of southern Damascus.

- *Kata'ib Hizballah* (KH or the Hizballah Brigades): Considered one of the more elite Iraq, "Special Groups" created by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Lebanese Hizballah, Kata'ib Hizballah is one of the most openly pro-Iranian organizations in Iraq. The group made a name for itself through the use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), particularly the deadly Explosively Formed Penetrator (EFP) against U.S. and Coalition forces. KH claimed its first loss in Syria in March, 2013. The group has funneled many fighters to Syria, though the numbers it has contributed are unknown.
- *The Badr Organization*: The Badr Organization, while initially claiming that they were dropping their armed capability, Badr has become a key Iraqi Shi'a Islamist militia in Syria. Through their "Armed Wing", Badr has claimed to have sent some 1,500 members to Syria as part of their expeditionary unit called *Quwet al-Shahid Muhammed Baqir al-Sadr* (The Martyr Muhammed Baqir al-Sadr Forces).
- *Harakat Hizballah al-Nujaba'* (The Hizballah Movement of the Outstanding. It is also known as Harakat Nujaba'): Harakat Hizballah al-Nujaba' was formed as a front group comprised of fighters primarily from Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata'ib Hizballah, and there are claims it also includes members of the Promised Day Brigades (the successor militia to Muqtada al-Sadr's *Jaysh al-Mahdi*). This front sends fighters to Syria who fight under the banner of three militias formed from their fighters. Little is known about the first Syria-based militia, *Liwa' al-Hamad*. However, *Liwa' 'Ammar Ibn Yasir* (The 'Ammar Ibn Yasir Brigade) has reportedly been active in Aleppo, especially in rural areas. Sheikh Akram al-Ka'bi, a founder of Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq leads the group. Liwa'a 'Ammar Ibn Yasir's fighters openly describe themselves as "Jnood al-Wilaya" or "Soldiers of the Wali", a reference to Khamenei's political-religious title (Wali al-Faqih). Though social media, Liwa' 'Ammar Ibn Yasir claimed they would, "fulfil the mandates of Wali". The group has also described Khamenei as the "Lion of Shi'ism". Banners of Khamenei and the late Iranian Supreme Leader, Grand Ayatollah Khomeini often accompany the caskets of fallen members of Liwa' 'Ammar Ibn Yasir. Another militia, *Liwa' al-Imam al-Hasan al-Mujtaba* (The Imam Hasan-The Chosen Brigade), which claims to operate along the main road leading to Damascus Airport and in the rural sections of East Ghouta, acts as another Syria-based front militia for Harakat Hizballah al-Nujaba'.
- *Liwa' Abu Fadl al-Abbas* (The Abu Fadl al-Abbas Brigade): Liwa' Abu Fadl al-Abbas was the first Shi'a militia to be announced in Syria. Reportedly, this militia was formed out of local Shi'a (many of whom are Iraqi) living in the area around the Sayyida Zaynab Shrine in southern Damascus. However, based on the group's own imagery, statements, and interviews which have been conducted with the organization's fighters, it is clear the group's core fighting force was comprised of a mix of Iranian-backed organizations, such as Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Lebanese Hizballah, Kata'ib Hizballah, and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq. Liwa' Abu Fadl al-Abbas's current commander goes by the nom de guerre of Abu Ajeeb.

- *Liwa' Zulfikar* (The Zulfikar Brigade): Liwa' Zulfikar's fighters have included members of Lebanese Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed Shi'a Islamist organizations. Its commander was Fadel Subhi, an Iraqi more commonly known as Abu Hajar. Subhi was also a commander in Liwa' Abu Fadl al-Abbas. He was killed in Dara'a on September 16, 2013. Iranian media had reported that prior to his deployment to Syria, he spent time in Iran. Following his death, his body was shipped from Syria to Iran and then onto Najaf, Iraq. The group is now led by another Iraqi Shi'a named Abu Shahed who was also a leader within Liwa' Abu Fadl al-Abbas.
- *Sariyya al-Tali'a al-Khurasani* (The Vanguard of Khurasani Unit): Claiming to be based in Arbil, Iraq (which is unlikely), this group of Iraqi Shi'a fighters primarily operates in East Ghouta. Commanded by Iraqi Shi'a Ali Yasiri, the organization uses Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' logo on its flag and identification patches. It is unknown which groups have contributed fighters to it.
- *Liwa' al-Imam al-Husayn* (The Imam Husayn Brigade): Liwa' al-Imam al-Husayn purports to be an organization loyal to Muqtada al-Sadr. While the group appears to be real, its messaging does not fit reality. Iraqi Shi'a radical leader, Muqtada al-Sadr has been extremely vocal about opposing efforts to send Shi'a fighters to Syria. Additionally, he has been involved in many disputes with Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, which appears to share members with Liwa' al-Imam al-Husayn. Thus, it's likely this group actually utilizes Sadrist splinters and may be an Iranian-backed attempt to sway Shi'a followers of Muqtada al-Sadr to join their efforts in Syria.

Areas of Operation & Impact

When Iranian-backed Shi'a Islamist armed elements initiated their presence in Syria, they were often small forces with specialized tasks. Fighters, predominantly from Iraq, were flown into Damascus's and other major airports. As their deployments increased, they have been instrumental in forming so-called "core-forces" of elite and well-equipped fighters who help rally less experienced, equipped, and/or motivated fighters. As Iranian-backed Shi'a armed-presence grew, these units, particularly those belonging to Lebanese Hezbollah expanded beyond advisory, intelligence, and more specialized roles. The importance of securing Damascus Airport was neither lost on the Assad regime nor on Lebanese Hezbollah. Specialized Iraqi Shi'a and Lebanese Hezbollah units secured the airport as early as January 2013. In the spring of 2013, Shi'a militias were the main force used to take and secure Aleppo Airport.

Presently, Iranian-backed Shi'a Islamist organizations now comprise significant regular infantry units. At times these units have utilized artillery, rockets, mortars and armored vehicles, including tanks and infantry fighting vehicles.

Following Lebanese Hezbollah's victory in Qusayr, Shi'a Islamist armed elements have engaged in heavy fighting in Homs and East Ghouta. These engagements increased throughout the summer, from late June-early September. Some Shi'a Islamist forces were reported to be guarding roadways and other communications links between Damascus and the southern Syrian city of Suweida. By late-August, primarily Iraqi Shi'a manned militias with assistance from Lebanese Hezbollah began more extensive

combat operations in the southern Syrian city of Dara'a. These operations continued through September.

Starting in late October, organizations such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq began calling for volunteers to participate in what was deemed the, "Ashura Husayn Campaign". The campaign, as the name implies, was meant to coincide with the Shia religious holiday which commemorates the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali, the third Imam of Shia Islam. The offensive began in mid-October in Damascus and led to Shia militias taking key neighborhoods in southern suburbs of Damascus and some rural areas to the south, east, and west of the city. Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada reported via its social media apparatus that it was involved in fighting in Hajar al-Aswad. Other districts such as Husaynia and Sbeneh were also taken by a mixture of Shia militia organizations and the Syrian army.

Around the same time, Lebanese Hizballah was reported to take the lead in an offensive in the mountainous area, known as Qalamoun, which is around 40 miles north of Damascus and is close to Lebanon. Syrian rebel elements have also reported a rise in the number of clashes their forces have been involved with Shi'a militia elements in areas around Aleppo.

A Khomeinist Style of Shi'a Revival

Iranian-backed Shi'a Islamist groups in Syria are not seeking to impose a Khomeinist form of government on Syria, but their goals are multifold. IRGC-QF's Qassem Suleimani has been working tirelessly to build a more unified and cohesive network of ideologically-loyal proxy forces. Syria has provided that opportunity. While the conflict Syria, presents a serious challenge to Iran's regional interests, there are positive components for Iranian regional policy.

Militarily, the Syrian War is providing on-the-ground training for thousands of loyal forces and assisting with the construction of more unified proxies willing to fight for Iran's ideological causes. Due to the fact that training regimens were changed (from 2007-2010) to focus more on traditional forms of urban and rural combat, Iran has a foreign legion of sorts which it can use as a rapid reaction force.

This does not mean that these groups have "evolved" out of their abilities to execute asymmetric operations or terrorist attacks. If anything, it has made them far more deadly. Instead, their increased training, better equipment, leadership, and organization has made them into an extremely potent element in future Iranian armed projections around the Middle East.

The threat these organizations pose is not simply limited to direct U.S. interests which can be targeted with conventional munitions. In the long-term, Iran is being viewed by the region's Shi'a masses as their protector. As traditional Shi'a Islamic leaders lose relevance in an increasingly violent and sectarian region, more Shi'a will turn to Iran and its proxies for a sense of empowerment and ideology. This has not been lost on Tehran, which has been actively encouraging its proxies to market Iran and Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei as Shi'ism's protector and leader.

If the IRGC-QF trained and equipped Lebanese Hizballah was particularly deadly against U.S. interests in the 1980s, and then Hizballah and IRGC-QF trained Iraqi "Special Groups" (such as Kata'ib Hizballah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq) proved their deadliness by killing hundreds of U.S. and Coalition personnel during the Iraq War (2003), it is likely these groups will continue to pose a threat to American interests and forces in the region. Ideologically, they still view the U.S. as their main enemy and if a command comes from

the Wali al-Faqih, these forces will follow orders. In Syria, despite continued losses of their fighters, their power has not appeared to ebb.

Mr. POE. Mr. Barfi for 5 minutes please.

**STATEMENT OF MR. BARAK BARFI, RESEARCH FELLOW, THE
NEW AMERICA FOUNDATION**

Mr. BARFI. Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today about the various jihadist groups operating in Syria. Before I begin, I just want to give a quick shout out to my advisor/professor Richard Bulliet at Columbia who taught me all the nuances of Islam that Phillip has just reviewed with me.

Syria has emerged as the number one destination of foreign jihadists. Pipelines from the Arabian Peninsula, Europe and North Africa funnel fighters to Syria. Some of these fighters have allied with homegrown extremists to create the Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS. Today, ISIS is the strongest brigade in Syria with a robust presence in many of country's provinces. However, although media attention is largely focused on ISIS, there are a number of other Salafist and jihadist brigades organizations that espouse an anti-modern and anti-Western message that are active in Syria.

ISIS' roots date back to the January 2012 creation of Jabhat al-Nusra, or JN, when al-Qaeda's Iraqi affiliate, the Islamic State in Iraq, or ISI, sought to exploit the Syrian revolution to establish a regional branch there. On April 8th, 2013, ISI's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced that JN had been absorbed into ISI to become ISIS. JN's leader rebuffed the merger and received the support of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Nevertheless, within days many JN fighters defected to ISIS. ISIS also took over a number of JN's compounds. Moderate members deserted for the rebel-led Free Syrian Army or FSA. It appeared that JN was on the brink of disintegration.

But shedding outliers who enflamed internal dissent lead to a more unified membership and a more cohesive ideology. The issue of takfirism, or declaring a Muslim an infidel, was bitterly contested within JN. The leadership was never comfortable with the extremists who advocated it and were pleased that they jumped ship to ISIS. In addition, most of the radicals who left were foreign fighters, allowing JN to present itself as authentically Syrian. Tensions between ISIS and JN are illustrated by the events in the city of Raqqa.

After the April merger, JN's leader Abu Sa'd decided not to join ISIS. Instead, he abandoned JN's compound that is now under ISIS control with about 30 fighters. After keeping a low profile for several months as it reorganized, JN reemerged in September. In the interim, it absorbs units from the rebel-led Free Syrian Army who felt threatened by ISIS' consolidation of power. A number of units from the 11th Division such as Thuwar Raqqa and Muntasir Billah joined JN. But JN's comeback vexed ISIS, which responded by incarcerating the former leader Abu Sa'd. In other areas such as Aleppo, ISIS members have defected back to JN.

Other factors have brought the intra-al-Qaeda conflict to the fore. On November 8th, al-Zawahiri announced the disbanding of ISIS, restricting al-Baghdadi's theater to Iraq and appointing JN as al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate. Given ISIS' independence from al-Qaeda's

Pakistan based leadership, and its autonomous financial resources, al-Baghdadi has no need to accept al-Zawahiri's diktats. He has previously rebuffed al-Zawahiri's Syrian directives and is likely to do so again. As smaller brigades such as Asifa al-Shamal and Ghuraba al-Sham are squeezed out of the revolution by their larger counterparts, it is likely that rebel groups will consolidate into pro-ISIS and anti-ISIS groups. The anti-ISIS block will probably in the future be led by organizations such as JN. Such mergers portend a future battle where JN will play an important role as the bulwark against ISIS expansion.

ISIS is able to act with impunity because of its predominance in the Syrian arena. It has a qualitative superiority over FSA units. Foreign jihadists brought with them skills learned in other conflicts. In addition, its ideological dedication to the revolution, often lacking in other FSA brigades, reflects a commitment that is admired by Syrians of all stripes. It is not only the organization's martial prowess that assures its popularity. In a war that has devastated state institutions, Syrians have few options for judicial arbitration. Because ISIS' leaders are mainly foreign they can portray themselves as neutral mediators.

The organization also provides municipal and social services such as supplying grain to bakeries and establishing schools and summer camps. Local circumstances often dictate its relationship with the civilian community. In the areas where corrupt FSA units or inefficient administrators operated prior to its arrival, ISIS has been welcomed. But in regions where local officials have created a modicum of government, ISIS has received poor grades. ISIS seeks to create an Islamic state guided by the harshest interpretation of Islamic law that have little grounding in Islamic history.

The organization has declared that its struggle will not end with the toppling of the Syrian regime. It plans to take the fight to other Arab countries in its quest to create a nebulous caliphate. ISIS cooperates with many FSA and Islamist brigades. They sponsor joint operations and divide the spoils between them. But the organization has also clashed with other rebel groups. When ISIS sought to consolidate its control over Raqqa, it dispatched a suicide bomber to destroy a compound of FSA unit Ahfad al-Rasul. In July, ISIS killed Kamal Hamami, a senior FSA leader in Ltakia. His death sparked FSA promises of a military riposte that never materialized. Indeed, various FSA units often boast it will take on ISIS only to back down later.

In some provinces such as Raqqa, the FSA is no longer in a position to challenge it. In others such as Aleppo——

[The prepared statement of Mr. Barfi follows:]

JIHADIST ORGANIZATIONS IN SYRIA

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House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade
November 20, 2013

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today about the various jihadist groups operating in Syria. Before I begin, I want to give a quick shout out to my advisor, Columbia University Professor Richard Bulliet who schooled me in the nuances of Islam. Syria has emerged as the number one destination of foreign jihadists. Pipelines from the Arabian Peninsula, Europe and North Africa funnel fighters to Syria.

Some of these fighters have allied with homegrown extremists to create the Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate, known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Today, ISIS is the strongest brigade in Syria with a robust presence in many of the country's provinces. However, although media attention has largely focused on ISIS, there are a number of other Salafist and jihadist organizations that also espouse anti-modern and anti-Western ideologies.

ISIS' roots date back to the January 2012 creation of Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) when al-Qaeda's Iraqi affiliate, the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), sought to exploit the Syrian revolution to establish a regional branch there. On April 8, 2013, ISI's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced that JN had been absorbed into ISI to create the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). JN's leader rebuffed the merger and received the support of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Nevertheless, within days many JN fighters defected to ISIS. ISIS also took over a number of JN's compounds. Moderate members deserted for the rebel-led Free Syrian Army (FSA) units. It appeared that JN was on the brink of disintegration.

But shedding outliers who enflamed internal dissent led to a more unified membership and a more cohesive ideology. The issue of takfirism, or declaring other Muslims to be non-believers, was bitterly contested within JN. The leadership was never comfortable with the extremists who advocated it, and were pleased when they jumped ship for ISIS. In addition, most of the radicals who left were foreigners, allowing JN to present itself as authentically Syrian.

Tensions between ISIS and JN are illustrated by events in the city of Raqqa. After the April merger, JN's leader, Abu Sa'd, chose not to join ISIS. Instead, he abandoned JN's compound, now under ISIS' control, with about thirty fighters. After keeping a low profile for several months as it reorganized, JN reemerged in September. In the interim, it absorbed units from the rebel-led Free Syrian Army (FSA), who felt threatened by ISIS' consolidation of power. A number of units from the 11th Division such as Thuwar Raqqa and Muntasir Billah joined JN. But JN's comeback vexed ISIS, which responded by incarcerating Abu Sa'd. In other areas, such as Aleppo, ISIS members have defected back to JN.

Other factors have brought the intra-al-Qaeda conflict to the fore. On November 8, al-Zawahiri announced the disbanding of ISIS, restricting al-Baghdadi's theater to Iraq and appointing JN as al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate. Given ISIS' independence from al-Qaeda's Pakistan-based leadership, and its autonomous financial resources, al-Baghdadi has no need to accept al-Zawahiri's diktats. He has previously rebuffed al-Zawahiri's Syrian directives and will do so again.

As smaller brigades such as Asifa al-Shamal and Ghuraba al-Sham are squeezed out of the revolution by their larger counterparts, it is likely that rebel groups will consolidate into pro-ISIS and anti-ISIS blocks led by JN. Such mergers portend a future battle where JN will play an

important role as the bulwark against ISIS expansion.

ISIS is able to act with impunity because of its predominance in the Syrian arena. It has a qualitative superiority over other FSA units. Foreign jihadists brought with them combat skills learned in other conflicts. In addition, its ideological dedication to the revolution, often lacking in other FSA brigades, reflects a commitment that is admired by Syrians of all stripes.

It is not only the organization's martial prowess that assures its popularity. In a war that has devastated state institutions, Syrians have few options for judicial arbitration. Because ISIS' leaders are mainly foreign, they are neutral mediators. The organization also provides municipal and social services, such as supplying grain to bakeries and establishing schools and summer camps for youth.

Local circumstances often dictate its relationship with the civilian community. In areas where corrupt FSA units or inefficient administrators operated prior to its arrival, ISIS has been welcomed. But in regions where local officials had created a modicum of government, ISIS has received poor grades.

ISIS seeks to create an Islamic state guided by the harshest interpretations of Islamic law that have little grounding in Islamic history. The organization has declared that its struggle will not end with the toppling of the Syrian regime. It plans to take the fight to other Arab countries in its quest to create a nebulous caliphate.

ISIS cooperates with many FSA and Islamist brigades. They sponsor joint operations and divide the spoils. But the organization has also clashed with other rebel groups. When ISIS sought to consolidate its control over Raqqa, it dispatched a suicide bomber to destroy the compound of the FSA unit Ahfad al-Rasul. In July, ISIS killed Kamal Hamami, a senior FSA leader in Latakia. His death sparked FSA promises of a military riposte that never materialized. Indeed, various FSA units often boast that they will take on ISIS only to back down later. In some provinces such as Raqqa, the FSA is no longer in a position to challenge it. In others such as Aleppo, the most powerful brigade, Tawhid, has no desire to do so.

Last week, ISIS decapitated a fighter from the Islamist brigade Ahrar al-Sham. The latter has demanded that the killers be tried. ISIS will likely seek to reach an accord. Because it knows that if it does not, Ahrar, unlike the fainthearted FSA, will respond in kind.

Ahrar al-Sham is one of the most powerful brigades in Syria. It has a presence across several regions. Like ISIS, it advocates a puritanical Islamist creed known as Salafism. But unlike ISIS, it does not espouse radical doctrines such as takfirism and the indiscriminate killing of minorities. Ahrar advocates the creation of an Islamic state with limited citizen rights. It cooperates with Western journalists. It has often stated that its struggle will end with the revolution. Most of its members are Syrian, but there are some foreigners in its ranks. Like other brigades, Ahrar cooperates with ISIS, with some commanders enjoying strong ties with their al-Qaeda counterparts. But its main allies are in the Syrian Islamic Front which joins together eleven Salafi brigades.

Jaysh al-Muhajrin wa al-Ansar (JMA) is another jihadist organization active in Syria. Led by Chechans, its rank and file is largely foreign. JMA has pledged allegiance to ISIS, but nevertheless differs with ISIS on a number of ideological points. Its leadership has sometimes stated that the organization does not seek to use Syria as a launching pad for other regional campaigns, but merely seeks the overthrow of the Syrian regime. And whereas ISIS leader al-Baghdadi has obscured his real identity and lives in anonymity, JMA believes a caliph must reveal himself and openly interact with the masses. JMA is particularly active in the northern provinces of Aleppo and Idlib.

The FSA has never been - as some of its American backers claim - a secular organization whose units fight for democratic freedoms and a chance to emulate Western society. Most brigades are Islamists. But as the Syrian conflict descends into a maelstrom of daily massacres and mass carnage, fighters are increasingly drawn to the most extreme ideologies. As a result, jihadist organizations will only get stronger as the fighting drags on.

The United States' primary objective in Syria should be to deny al-Qaeda the establishment of a new safe haven. Though Washington has successfully disrupted the organization's activities in the Arabian Peninsula and Pakistan, it is neglecting the emergence of its newest theater of operations. Al-Qaeda has proved in the past that such inattention will only result in a lethal blowback with wide-ranging repercussions. The chaos in Syria has magnified this threat. Al-Qaeda has exploited the political and security instability to take control of large cities. It has established everything from schools to social welfare bureaus. As the Syrian civil war inches endlessly on, al-Qaeda is able to indoctrinate a generation of youth in its extremist ideology. It will be difficult to reverse these trends as they become further entrenched.

The collapse of the Syrian state and the proliferation of heavy weapons such as tanks and surface-to-air missiles have transformed the country into a jihadist Elysian fields. They have poured into the country from three continents. Hundreds of Europeans, if not a thousand, have flowed into Syria. These fighters can return to their homelands and easily move around other European countries to plot attacks. New transnational networks have emerged to funnel fighters and funds to ISIS.

These factors make combatting ISIS a chief priority. It remains to be seen whether Washington will confront the challenge.

Mr. POE. The gentleman's time has expired. We do have your entire statement. Thank you, Mr. Barfi. And Mr. Tabler, you have 5 minutes.

**STATEMENT OF MR. ANDREW J. TABLER, SENIOR FELLOW,
THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY**

Mr. TABLER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Sherman, and to my fellow panelists, thanks for this opportunity to testify before the subcommittee today. I have been asked to focus my testimony on U.S. national security interests in the region affected by the Syria conflict, what it means for Syria's neighbors, and regional implications. I will be as brief as I can on three very important questions.

I have been working on Syria for about 13 years, including living in the country for about seven. To put the current situation in perspective, historically Syria's primary importance to the United States is based on its role as the keystone in the post-Ottoman Middle East state architecture. Many, if not most of you, remember the 15-year Lebanon war, where civil strife spawned civil war, terrorism, and the destruction of the U.S. Embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut, whose 241 killed marked the single largest day death toll for the Marine Corps since the battle of Iwo Jima.

The Lebanon war was horrible, but strategically and metaphorically, and I don't mean to belittle it, Lebanon was just the small row house on the end of a block of states carved out of the Ottoman Empire by the Sykes-Picot Agreement. It was hard for the fighting and sectarianism to spread, most notably because the forces of the two neighboring row houses, Israel and a demographically different and more stable Syria under Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez, that intervened to stop and contain the sectarian nature of the conflict. Syria, in comparison, is the big row house in the middle of the block.

And while the United States does not have historic interests in Syria and spent many years on opposite sides during the Cold War and the War on Terrorism, almost all of Syria's neighbors are strategic U.S. allies—Israel, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Lebanon, which is not allied with the United States, but where Washington has considerable interests and challenges. What that effectively means is that what happens in Syria is not going to stay there, and it is difficult to contain.

What happened in Lebanon during the '70s and '80s is also occurring in Syria. A similar conflict, but it is happening much faster and on different levels. Regional sectarian rivalries are competing in Syria's bloody fight with the vanguard forces coming from the laundry list of U.S. designated foreign terrorist organizations. Today Hezbollah, IRGC-Quds Force and other Iranian backed Shia militias fight alongside the Assad regime in the west. Salafists and jihadists, some of whom are al-Qaeda affiliates fight alongside and often against, these days at least, the Syrian Sunni dominated opposition. And in Kurdish areas, the Democratic Union Party, the PYD, an organization closely affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party otherwise known as the PKK, is now dominant.

In a policy sense, the Syrian Arab Republic, which was a founding member of the 1979 list of State Sponsors of Terrorism, has de-

volved into three Syrias in which U.S. designated terrorist organizations are not only present, but ascendant. As a result, U.S. national security interests affected by the Syria conflict are growing in number and in scale. This is not going to go away any time soon and is going to be an issue for U.S. foreign policy makers and could also be an issue on the domestic scene depending on which way the Syrian conflict goes and the threats that come out of it.

Those that I can identify, and I don't claim to speak absolutely the truth on this, but I have identified five general areas. One, first, concerns stability of key U.S. Middle East allies. Thus far, Syrian refugees and cross border fighting have been the primary security threats to Israel, Jordan, Turkey as well as Lebanon. With up to half the Syrian population on the move, or a third, estimates here depend, those who are taking shelter either inside of Syria or in neighboring countries, these areas become breeding grounds for terrorist groups that oppose not only their host countries, but the United States as well.

Counter terrorism, both sides in the Syria conflict have moved to the extremes over the last year as my fellow panelists have outlined. There is now what I call a convergence of threats in Syria with direct Iranian influence via terrorist groups at an all-time high in the Levant as a whole, and al-Qaeda affiliates also spreading among the opposition. It seems likely that Syria will devolve into a number of what are increasingly described as ungoverned spaces from which U.S. designated terrorist organizations could launch operations in Syria, but across the globe.

There is also energy security as well. The nature of the Syrian conflict is increasingly sectarian fueled by both sides, and with the generally Shia forces supported by Iran and the Sunni forces supported by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. As this conflict gets more sectarian, it eats down in the sectarian nature of Syrian society in the region. That would also have a knock-on effect concerning the price of oil. The price of oil is not set by source, ladies and gentlemen. It is a world commodity and it is set by overall risk in the world to the supplies.

There is also a large step to non-proliferation concerning chemical weapons which have been addressed via the recent agreement between Russia and the United Nations and the United States on its destruction, and of course we have the humanitarian concerns and the health concerns with a major outbreak of polio occurring in the middle of the country. I will just conclude. There are a number of other recommendations in the written testimony.

What I can say to you in brief is that while the Chemical Weapons Convention which is recently agreed seemed to have addressed that aspect of the threat emerging from Syria, on the other issues that I outlined it seems as if we are just kicking the can down the road. And as I think my fellow panelists have outlined, the threats emerging out of Syria will continue for the foreseeable future with no easy solutions for the United States or our allies. Thank you.

[The prepared statement of Mr. Tabler follows:]

November 20, 2013

United States House of Representatives
Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade
Written Testimony for Hearing “Terrorist Groups in Syria”
Andrew J. Tabler
Senior Fellow
Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Chairman Poe and Ranking Member Sherman:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade on “Terrorist Groups in Syria.” The committee’s hearings investigate key challenges to U.S. national security, which sadly now come to include the metastasizing Syria crisis.

As stated by multiple officials since the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, the United States remains deeply concerned with the deteriorating humanitarian situation inside of Syria that has been a direct result of the efforts of President Bashar al-Assad to shoot his way out of the country’s largest-ever uprising, which has set off a grinding civil war. I have been asked to focus my testimony on U.S. national security interests in the region affected by the Syria conflict, what it means for Syria’s neighbors, and regional implications.

Historically, Syria’s primary importance to the United States is based on its role as perhaps the keystone in the post-Ottoman Middle East state architecture. Many, if not most of you, remember the 15-year Lebanon War, where civil strife spawned civil war, terrorism, and the destruction of the U.S. Embassy and Marine Barracks in Beirut, whose 241 killed marked the largest single day death toll for the Marine Corps since the battle of Iwo Jima. The Lebanese War was horrible, but strategically and metaphorically, Lebanon was just the small row house on the end of block of states carved out of the Ottoman Empire by the Sykes-Picot Agreement. It was hard for the fighting and sectarianism to spread, most notably because the forces of the two neighboring row houses – Israel and a demographically different and more stable Syria under Bashar al-Assad’s father, Hafez – intervened to stop and contain the sectarian nature of the conflict.

Syria, in comparison, is the big row house in the middle of the block. And while the United States does not have historic interests in Syria, and spent many years on opposite sides of the Cold War and the War on Terrorism, almost all of Syria’s neighbors are strategic U.S. allies: Israel, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Lebanon, which is not allied with the United States but where Washington has considerable interests and challenges. What that effectively means is that what happens in Syria is not going to stay there, as it’s difficult to contain. What happened in Lebanon is also occurring in Syria much faster and on different levels. Regional sectarian rivalries are competing in Syria’s bloody fight, with the vanguard of forces coming from a laundry list of U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations. Today, Hezbollah, IRGC-Quds Force, and other Iranian-backed Shia militias fight alongside the Assad regime in the west, Salafists and Jihadists, some of whom are Al-Qaeda affiliates, fight alongside (and often against) the Syrian Sunni-dominated opposition. In Kurdish areas, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), an organization closely affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), is now dominant. In a policy sense, the Syrian Arab Republic, which was a founding member of the 1979 list of

State Sponsors of Terrorism, has devolved into three Syrias in which U.S.-designated terrorist groups are not only present, but ascendant.

As a result, U.S. national security interests affected by the Syria conflict are growing in number. They include, but are not limited to:

1. **Stability of key U.S. Middle East allies.** Thus far, Syrian refugees and cross border fighting have been the primary security threats to allies such as Israel, Jordan, Turkey as well as to Lebanon. With up to half the Syrian population now on the move, up to five million in neighboring countries as unofficial and official refugees, and with no end in sight to the Syria conflict, areas where Syrians take shelter in neighboring countries increasingly become breeding grounds for terrorist groups that oppose not only their host countries, but the United States as well.
2. **Counterterrorism.** Both sides in the Syria conflict have moved to the extremes over the last year, with U.S.-designated terrorist organizations making up sizeable forces of those under arms. The United States and its allies are now facing a “convergence of threats” in Syria, with direct Iranian influence via terrorist groups at an all-time high in Syria and the Levant as a whole, and al Qaeda affiliates also spreading among the opposition. While the Assad regime has recently been able to retake a number of lost areas, it is unclear if and how the regime and allied groups can hold these areas. It seems likely that Syria will be devolve into a number of “ungoverned spaces” from which U.S.-designated terrorist groups could launch operations not only in Syria, but across the globe.
3. **Energy Security:** The nature of the Syrian conflict is increasingly sectarian, fuelled by each sides’ regional sponsors (roughly, Shia-associated forces backed by Iran and Sunni opposition forces backed by Sunni states and societies such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and others). Should this fight spread from Syria to neighboring countries, including Iraq, Turkey, and Lebanon, U.S. energy and military interests would be increasingly affected in detrimental ways. While the United States sources more and more of its energy needs from North America, the price of oil, a world commodity, remains heavily exposed to political and military developments in the Middle East. Sharp increases in energy prices would have a catastrophic effect on U.S. economic growth.
4. **Non-Proliferation:** Syria has one of the region’s largest stockpiles of chemical weapons, which are currently being addressed under an international accord struck with Russia and the United Nations last September. The destruction of these materials is clearly in the interest of the United States and its allies, as their use by either the Assad regime or non-state actors/terrorist groups threatens regional and U.S. security. Whether President Assad decides or is able to follow through on his commitments to eradicate all weaponized agents and non-weaponized precursors remains to be seen.
5. **Humanitarian/health concerns:** Millions of Syrians are currently suffering under extreme conditions, with over 120,000 killed and tens of thousands or more missing. Disease, including Polio, is increasingly spreading in Syria, with implications for global health concerns.

Dealing with Syria’s rebels and the extremist threat

Reports are growing of a sharp increase in the number of extremist groups operating in rebel-dominated areas of Syria. This has raised eyebrows in Washington, where policymakers continue to grapple with the question

of how to support the opposition without inadvertently helping jihadists expand their destabilizing impact across the Middle East. These concerns are growing among Syria's neighbors as well.

During a recent visit to Syrian border regions from southern Turkey, I spoke with armed and civilian opposition leaders about the extent to which extremist groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) have penetrated their ranks. I also asked them what kinds of measures the opposition should take to prevent these groups from gaining a permanent foothold or exploiting the current crisis over the regime's use of chemical weapons (e.g., by disrupting international efforts to destroy those weapons). As enumerated below, their answers indicate that mainstream rebels have a number of options for reining in extremism while bolstering the overall effort to force Bashar al-Assad's departure. And many of these options offer good opportunities for U.S. engagement.

1. **Accept the extremist problem.** Unlike in the past, opposition leaders now recognize that extremism is a growing problem in "liberated areas" under their control. Their main beef with groups such as ISIS and JN lies in their increasingly foreign nature and their methods of governance and operation; the only reason the rebels tolerate these factions is that they are effective fighters. At the same time, opposition leaders point out that the majority of rebels are not al-Qaeda, and that JN is more nationalist in orientation than ISIS. Yet the groups are better viewed as two heads of the same threat.
2. **Develop a national political and military strategy.** Both civilians and armed groups are adamant that they need to formulate a political and military strategy to deal with the growing extremist threat. Planning has been the Achilles' heel of the opposition (and the Assad regime) for decades, but the rise in extremism has convinced many rebels that ISIS and similar groups are a foreign threat that does not have the Syrian people's best interests at heart. The extremists counter that ISIS and JN are the country's best option given the West's recent decision not to follow through on threats to punish the regime militarily for using chemical weapons. Thus, if mainstream opposition groups want to maintain the uprising's nationalist bent, they should develop a coherent national plan for containing extremism among their ranks and drawing clearer lines between themselves and the jihadists. In return, the United States and its allies would be much more willing to fund the rebellion.
3. **Don't join multiple groups.** The Syrian opposition historically sees no conflict of interest in joining multiple alliances at the same time. On September 24, for example, a number of groups whose leaders are in or linked to the Western-backed Supreme Military Council (SMC) announced the formation of an "Islamic coalition," atop which is al-Qaeda affiliate JN, which aims to establish an Islamic state in Syria based on *sharia*. Opposition members' tendency to join multiple alliances at once may perhaps be seen as a way to keep options open with an array of patrons, but it also reinforces the view that the Syrian opposition has no foundation and is therefore not worth investing in. All the same, if these groups adopt principled stances, the United States and its allies could be in a position to back them.
4. **Go local, hold elections.** Many, if not most, oppositionists openly admit that their desperate situation makes them ripe for manipulation by outside patrons with agendas too extreme for most Syrians. These patrons take advantage of ego-related and ideological rivalries among opposition members, creating a cycle that only leads to more fragmentation and subnational agendas. To counter this trend, opposition leaders should accept the criticism by actual fighters who argue that local leaders should have much more authority. To avoid manipulation in the choosing of local leadership, opposition members should emphasize the relative success of elections in selected areas of Syria as a

mechanism for establishing authoritative leadership structures. These votes would be held in Syrian *nahawi* (districts equivalent to townships), *manatiq* (areas equivalent to counties), and *muhafazat* (governorates equivalent to states). Such a step would help solidify Syrian regional and national identities, making opposition members less susceptible to foreign patronage.

5. **Start by peeling off extremists.** Given the relative strength of extremist groups in Syria today, clashing with them openly only strengthens Assad's hand. So while nationalist/nonextremist groups should always defend themselves in the face of aggression by extremists, the former probably should wait before going on the offensive. Instead, opposition members should develop plans to peel off members of extremist groups with incentives, such as financial and other support. Many civilian oppositionists believe that dialogue programs between members of nationalist or moderate Islamist battalions and Salafist groups further right on the spectrum will help peel away members and undermine the overall support of extremists. This approach to undermining extremists, of course, would require progress on item two of this list: the development of a national military and political strategy. Still, for international donors, such a program would likely be much more attractive than first providing weapons. And increased support in other forms -- including weapons -- could follow from the United States and other Western countries.
6. **Emphasize that extremists only benefit the regime.** The opposition uses *cui bono* arguments to assess who benefits from the fighting and who actually supports extremist groups. Many in the opposition thus believe that ISIS is actually supported by the Assad regime. In a strategic sense, ISIS actions to capture areas such as Azaz play into the regime's hands. The opposition should emphasize the cumulative negative effect of ISIS and other extremist groups on both the opposition's effectiveness and its efforts to gather support from abroad.
7. **Use clerics to undermine extremists' religious authority.** Many extremist and al-Qaeda-linked groups follow equally extremist clerics who are not widely followed inside Syria. As such, the mainline opposition should work with well-known national clerics to undermine those followed by al-Qaeda and other extremists, as part of an overall effort to control the religious message within the opposition.
8. **Take a hard look at the SMC.** At present, the SMC encompasses both nationalist and Islamist brigades, with their ideological orientations often much more divergent than the range within Salafist and jihadist/extremist brigades on the far right. Therefore, opposition leaders need to look closely at the SMC, with the goal of identifying which groups remain aligned with the national agenda and which have lurches toward the extremists.
9. **Think through the assassinations dilemma.** Some opposition leaders maintain that extremist groups can be so ideological that only dramatic steps, such as assassinations, will work to displace them from Syrian and nearby territory. While assassinations may be necessary in some cases, they can end up strengthening the hand of extremists if used at the wrong time.
10. **Accept that chemical weapons make the situation much worse.** One might conclude that the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons against civilians could justify their seizure by opposition groups and use at key times against the regime and its supporters. A number of extremist groups operating in Syria even claim chemical weapons use is justifiable as an act of revenge. But the reality is much more difficult, ultimately strengthening the regime's hand and possibly drawing punitive measures from the international community. Enhancement of conventional weapons capabilities represents a much more productive approach for the opposition.

While implementing these measures will take time, starting now will help the Syrian opposition maintain its national character and create an environment conducive to containing the influence of extremist groups. Drawing clear lines between al-Qaeda affiliates and the mainline nationalist opposition will also make the latter much more attractive to the international community if and when a military or political settlement to the crisis emerges. Perhaps most urgent, however, is the need to remove the Syrian chemical weapons stockpile from the scene. This will help avoid the killing of more Syrians and prevent the conflict from widening any further than it already has.

I would be happy to expand upon this testimony and answer whatever questions you may have.

Respectfully submitted,

Andrew J. Tabler
Senior Fellow
Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Mr. POE. Thank all the panelists for their statements. We will begin the questions. I will recognize myself for 5 minutes.

Carve the scenario out hypothetically, if you can, and I know it is a hypothetical and it is based on your expertise. But down the road, as Mr. Tabler says, it is going to be eventually somebody is going to win and somebody is going to lose. You have got two terrorist groups on each side. The entire region is unstable because of what has taken place in Syria. So assume Assad wins and is able to run the rebels out. How does that play out? Assume he loses, the rebel groups take over. Is there civil war? Just kind of look into the future, if you can, for me. And I will ask that question to all four of you.

Mr. Jenkins?

Mr. JENKINS. It is a great question. I don't see one side prevailing in this conflict. Even if Assad were to fall and the fighting were to continue, Assad's growing power is not going to be able to, in the foreseeable future, reassert his authority throughout the country. So I think the premise has to be one of continuing conflict among a kaleidoscope of ethnic and sectarian groups in Syria that could go on for many, many years, and that is really the premise.

In that kind of scenario, the United States, without significant investment, is really at the margin. So the question becomes not one of whether we can back Assad or back the rebels against him, but rather what can we do within that kind of environment to meet the objectives that Mr. Tabler has identified in the country? What can we do to best serve our interests in a continuing conflict? And to even raise the broader question, although it may sound cynical, I know we, naturally, as Americans want to get to postwar on this, but given the nature of the conflict, can we get there? And is it absolutely vital to U.S. interests that we try to end the fighting in Syria, or do we simply accept that it will continue and try to contain it, and, as I say, live with this thing as it is, as these jihadists and Hezbollah and others tear each other up inside of the country once known as Syria?

Mr. POE. Thank you. I am going to change the question because you are running out of time. Try to make your answers shorter if you can. Terrorist groups and their influence in neighboring countries, whether it is the Assad regime or the rebel groups, their effect on neighbors—Jordan, Lebanon, and even Israel.

So Mr. Smyth, I will just ask you that question. How do you see that what has taken place what is the direction of those groups?

Mr. SMYTH. The direction in particular if you want to focus on the Iranian backed organizations, they are becoming an extremely professional force and they are very, very tough. We now have units that could directly attack Israeli interests, American interests, Saudi interests, and they are building their power up in Syria. This is kind of like their training ground in many ways. In fact, Lebanese Hezbollah was sending its reserve troops into Syria so that they could essentially train and gain combat skills. And where do you think they are going to send them afterwards? They are likely going to send them to South Lebanon. That is usually where they put more of their trained men. Often they send them other places to create new Iranian proxy organizations.

In terms of these other groups, Salafi jihadi groups, Sunni organizations, they too are gaining valuable combat experience. And it is interesting kind of trying to outline this. Iran has its own Islamic revolutionary ideology and it is a global ideology. They really do believe in this kind of Messianic future. The same thing goes for these Sunni jihadists. And they are all trying to get to that end. You now have two radical forms of Islamism fighting each other and this doesn't mean necessarily that they are going to stop fighting Western interests or any of their other enemies in the area.

Mr. POE. All right. My time has expired. I will recognize the ranking member, Mr. Sherman from California, for 5 minutes.

Mr. SHERMAN. Thank you, Judge. And for those who would take delight in the fact that Sunni extremists who hate America are killing Shiite extremists who hate America, we have to reflect on the fact that they are both learning how to kill. It used to be even a question whether the Alawites would really part to the Shiite movement. They are certainly not the Twelver Shiites that dominate Iran, and there are many different subgroups within the Sunni community. What we are seeing now is in effect a region-wide from Iran to Syria, a battle between Shiites and Sunnis.

Have each group coalesced sufficiently so that the different flavors of Sunnis all cooperate notwithstanding theological differences, and Alawites and Twelver Shiites and other Shiite inspired but theologically different organizations coalesce, do we see a coming together of two sides?

Mr. BARFI. So when we look at Alawis, Alawism starts in the 10th century. It is basically an offshoot of the 11th Shia Imam, and they are what is known as Ghuluww, or they are very extreme in their dedication to Ahl is to the point where he becomes a god or a deity. They were outside the pale of Shiism for centuries. Both the Sunnis, the Sunnis considered them infidels. Into the 19th century they were seen as worse than the Jews and Christians. They couldn't give testimony in courts in Syria. The Shia had no relationship with them historically. It starts to change in the early 20th century under French and Turkish influence. That really doesn't go anywhere because they tried to impose the Jafari or Twelver school of law. Later some Alawi scholars go to Iran and Iraq and they bring back books and some scholars. That made a little bit more progress.

But the Alawis, they don't pray in mosques. They are antinomian, which means they don't abide by any of the precepts of Islam—fasting during Ramadan, five prayers, abstaining from drinking alcohol. So there is——

Mr. SHERMAN. Are you saying the Alawis drink alcohol and don't fast during Ramadan?

Mr. BARFI. Yes.

Mr. SHERMAN. And don't do all of the various things that some of us associate with Islam, and yet there seems to be a very solid bond. One of the other witnesses talks about how someone says I am not dying for Assad, I am dying for Shia. Yes, and I am sure that was an Alawite who is now ready to die for Shiitism. Have the Alawites and the Twelver and other Shiites come together? Mr. Smyth?

Mr. SMYTH. Well, first of all, that singer is actually an Iraqi Shia. He sings for Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq. So that is a special group that the Alliance created. However, you are hitting on something very, very important. Iran is trying to coalesce Shia as a whole, especially Twelver Shia, behind the Iranian mantle. We are your protectors. This is the message—

Mr. SHERMAN. Yes, they protect Twelver Shiites, they now seem to be protecting a group that generations ago they might not have accepted as even being Islam. But I do want to move on to another question. Who is financing the Sunni extremists in Syria? Does that money come from well connected people in Saudi Arabia, and do the Saudis happen to know that al-Qaeda likes blowing up things associated with the royal family?

Mr. Jenkins?

Mr. JENKINS. For the groups that are not the hard core al-Qaeda groups that we have identified, certainly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the other Gulf monarchies are providing support to those groups. For those that have been identified as al-Qaeda-linked, it appears to be that their funding is coming from private donations primarily in the Gulf monarchies.

Mr. SHERMAN. And these private citizens, they are not the salt of the earth. They are very rich individuals who are well connected and allowed to do this?

Mr. JENKINS. They are wealthy individuals, and there is a curious relationship in which a number of the rebel groups in a sense emerged during the rebellion and declared themselves on social media in order to seek foreign patrons. A little bit like football teams in a sense except you create the team first and you look for a wealthy backer, and then you brag about your numbers and your exploits in order to keep that flow of support coming. There is a lot of that taking place, and it involves extremely wealthy individuals.

Mr. SHERMAN. So there are people in Syria who would want to kill us who are financed by well connected folks in the Gulf, and I yield back.

Mr. POE. Sherman yields back. The chair recognizes the vice chair, Mr. Kinzinger, for 5 minutes.

Mr. KINZINGER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and again thank you all for being here. As I mentioned in my opening statement, there is no really good answer here. And I think it was well said that when the chairman asked to game out both options, rebels win or Assad wins, what does it look like, and the answer is, well, there is always going to be lawlessness in Syria. This is in essence Afghanistan pre-9/11 now. And so I think it is difficult.

But with that said, I want to pose to each of you the question of—again, I have been critical of the administration in saying we should have been out there more. We should have been engaged early, when this was a handleable situation. But we are where we are today, and unfortunately I haven't found the time machine yet. If I do you will know about it because I will go back and maybe we will never even talk about it then.

But I will start with you, Mr. Tabler. If you want to just talk about, briefly, what is the U.S.'s option here and how should we be more involved in order to see an outcome? And again, whether

it is Assad stays or Assad goes, how can we have a more peaceful outcome with U.S. involvement? I want to hear your thoughts on this.

Mr. TABLER. A very good question. There are various methods. We have so many policy objectives running at the same time in Syria now it would very hard to achieve them all. Since the summer of 2011, August 2011 to be specific, the position of the United States is that Assad should step aside and lead to a transitional governing body which is outlined in the Geneva Accord of June 2012.

Mr. KINZINGER. I think it is safe to say too, that was before we had an intense amount of extremist groups.

Mr. TABLER. That is right. And so what has happened over time is that the ability to pursue those ends via state means has gone down. It was one of the downsides of a hands-off, lead from behind policy, as has been described, or the light footprint. There are several definitions for this and I am not claiming to know which one it is. So what has happened over time is that as the conflict has morphed and grown in scale and the state has been destroyed, and I think Mr. Jenkins outlined that and the other panelists as well, the question is, how do you then confront this convergence of threats that are coming out of Syria, both on the Iranian side and on the overall Sunni side and the extremist nature of the fight?

There are two primary areas. One is through direct intervention, and that was most recently debated concerning the Assad regime's use, according to U.S. intelligence estimates, of sarin gas inside of Syria. The President did not go down that road, and that would have been a limited strike. Those kind of options are still on the table, and the White House continues to say that they are on the table. I don't know anybody that really sees how that might play out anytime soon, but we simply don't know.

The other way to arrest this, in the case of the CW incident it was concerning the regime, going forward you could launch ground strikes or other kinds of direct strikes on various terrorist groups. It is possible. Usually not done without the permission of the state itself, and I don't think the Assad regime would appreciate us bombing their associated forces. They might prefer if we bombed the rebels.

Then there is indirect intervention. And indirect intervention involves essentially like in Iraq, the Sahwa. It involves working with politically and militarily with groups on the ground to peel them away from the extremists. It is a much more slower, much more intelligent and sometimes precise way of defeating terrorists. The problem with that is it is very difficult to have a hands-off, lead from behind light footprint policy and to do that covertly.

Mr. KINZINGER. And I think just to tag on, it is basically the U.S. has to get more involved or the U.S. has to accept the chaos that is going to follow.

Mr. TABLER. Right. It would be hard to see how the situation in Syria gets better toward our interest without more American involvement. The question is what is the degree of that involvement? And that is where, until now it is still hotly debated. But what we can definitely say is that what we are doing until now is not working in terms of pursuing our interests, whether they are getting

Assad to step aside or to undermine extremism in the region or a lot of other issues that we pursue in the region as a whole. So the question is what to do next.

Mr. KINZINGER. I don't think anybody really knows what our policy is right now.

Mr. TABLER. There is extreme confusion even among those of us that have followed this for a long time and even those that have contact with the administration about how the administration would pursue and achieve its conflicting goals. That is true.

Mr. KINZINGER. And there is a lot of confusion among our allies as well, which is just as disheartening.

Mr. TABLER. And anger.

Mr. KINZINGER. Yes. With that, Mr. Chairman, I will yield back. Thank you. Right on time too.

Mr. POE. Thank the gentleman for watching the clock. The chair recognizes the other gentleman from Illinois, Mr. Schneider.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for calling this hearing. Mr. Barfi, I will start with you. Do you have a sense of how many organizations or groups are inside Syria fighting either on the side of the regime or against the regime? Ballpark number.

Mr. BARFI. There is hundreds of units and brigades. Some of them such as Liwa al-Tawhid is a very big brigade composed of different units numbering in the thousands. They are based in a province such as Aleppo. Then you have a Salafist brigade like Ahrar al-Sham, they are in several provinces and we are talking 10,000, 15,000, 20,000 fighters. Very strong. Then you have smaller groups like Amr ibn al-As which has a couple hundred fighters. But what is happening is it is a Pac-Man approach. Those larger brigades are slowly eating up the smaller brigades.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. So this summer I read a report that there was as many as 1,200 different groups fighting inside Syria. Has that number decreased at this point, expanded or stayed fairly constant?

Mr. BARFI. You would think that there is going to be a decrease as you have mergers and integrations. However, you are also seeing the emergence of new groups like Katibat al Nur in Aleppo. It is created by intellectuals and financed by businessmen because they thought that the FSA was giving the revolution a bad name.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Is a sense, I heard someone else use this context. The fighters coming in from the outside this gentleman described as fierce, and they are to fight to the death and even continue fighting after any negotiated agreement that might be possible, whereas, I would imagine businessmen coming together are not going to have the same fierceness of fight that some of these extremist groups have. Is that a fair characterization or am I jumping to a conclusion?

Mr. BARFI. Well, I am sorry. Maybe I wasn't so clear. The businessmen are funding the brigade. But what you see is the people that come from abroad they are much more ideological in the reasons that they fight for. Some of these other units, they were created by criminal gangs. They were just bored and had nothing to do. The revolution came, hey, let us get together and make our

criminal gang a rebel brigade and we can show that we are defending society and then steal cars under that banner instead.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. As I look at Syria, and other people have described this, that any military victory for either side would be a catastrophe for Syria. One side overtaking the other and the subsequent massacres and things you might expect. With all these groups fighting and fighting each other with the Pac-Man strategy taking, do any of you all, and I will leave this up to the entire panel, does anyone think there is a prospect for a political resolution to the civil war?

Mr. JENKINS. I certainly don't. I think the increasingly given nature of the tactics on both sides has now turned this into an existential contest for all concerned. That is, among the participants in the conflict none of them can clearly see a way in which they would survive under a regime that was dominated by another. And there is just an accumulation of too much bloodshed and too many calls for revenge to bring them together. I don't think a political solution is on. That is my view.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. Mr. Tabler, I saw you are looking to answer.

Mr. TABLER. A political solution to put Syria, the Syrian Arab Republic as it is officially known, back together in the foreseeable future, I think it would be very difficult to achieve. The administration is determined to start that process in talks in Geneva. I think those are now going to take place in January. There was a rumor that they might take place on December 12th. It would be very difficult to achieve those objectives. What I think we will have for the foreseeable future is, well, we will have a du jour Syria on a map, which is the one that is in front of us here, and in a de facto sense it will be divided into those three general areas that I outlined in my presentation. The problem is that the lines of control, the contours of control will not be clear. It will be more like a mosaic.

The other major problem is, especially in the opposition groups that in the face of such bloodshed we expected their elites to congeal, to come together more under a national banner. For a variety of reasons not just foreign sponsorship but also some, historically from my own work some historical proclivities within Syria that occur when people come out of an authoritarian system like that it gives way to grandiosity among leaders. It is not uncommon among politicians of course, but only if in the end—yes, present company excepted—but only in the end if it leads to the destruction of a nation. And I think what we are going to have to deal with is a divided Syria for the foreseeable future.

Mr. SCHNEIDER. I am sorry. I see I am out of time. If you could subsequently maybe touch on the fact with that as a statement, as a policy guidance, should the United States lean in and try to affect what is happening on the ground in Syria or should we stand back and try to contain everything within Syria? And I will yield.

Mr. TABLER. Would you like me, I can answer that?

Mr. POE. Very quickly.

Mr. TABLER. Sure. I think that containing it within Syria is not working. We have to deal with the disease itself. We have to just decide whether that involves the de facto partition of the country and how we deal with it. And then I think that will make it easier to deal with the different threats that I outlined. Trying to put the

two sides back together at this point and have kind of a viable solution seems at the moment a pipe dream.

Mr. POE. Thank you. The gentleman yields back. The chair recognizes the gentleman from California, Colonel Cook.

Mr. COOK. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to go back to the issue of chemical weapons. And obviously there is still a number of them in the country and everything, and the danger posed by falling into one of the, I don't know how many groups you have listed. I lost track. I didn't update my scorecard. But the scenarios there are just intriguing and horrific because they would go to any means whatsoever in their employment of it, do you have any comment on the possibility that that could be a military target of not just the sarin gas, but even more of the VX agents?

Mr. JENKINS. The chemical weapons are a potential target for all of the parties concerned simply because they are a prize that will give any of the units leverage and make them more important players than they are. In other words, when you get your hands on them, you are more important. But also, interestingly, Assad's agreement to get rid of the chemical weapons in a certain sense is a strategy that helps the Assad regime survive, because it is a major logistics enterprise to both protect and move those weapons and to ultimately dismantle or disarm them. Doing that in the midst of a conflict is very, very difficult, and so there is going to be extreme pressure on the rebel forces to not interfere with the disarmament process. In other words, it is a way in which we are obliged to accept the legitimacy of the Assad regime and the primacy of it and to lean on the rebels to allow the disarmament process to take place, because if the conflict continues at its current intensity, it is very, very difficult to get those weapons out of there.

Mr. COOK. Just to continue on that very quickly. You are talking about some extremist groups, obviously they kill people, take the hearts out and organs, and eat them, and obviously publicize that which, I think, was in the spring of this year—very, very shocking videos—that the ends achieve the means. And sooner or later they are going to look at that as a weapon of opportunity and that is why I mentioned that. But I don't want to run out of time. The Chechen rebels and any connections to the groups there, would this explain partly the Russian role in there other than its traditional support of the Assad regime or the fear of training Sunni extremists that we go back to Chechnya and blow up parts of Russia?

Mr. BARFI. Not at all. Putin sees this as a cold war. It is just a game in the cold war. He doesn't want to let the United States have anymore assets in the region. Some people think that it is because of the naval base at Tartus. He doesn't need that naval base. He can't bring frigates in there. He can't have long stays of the sailors in there. This is just a cold war mentality. He does not want the United States to win.

Mr. COOK. So you are saying he is not worried about the Chechen rebels and perhaps this ecumenical tie to the ones in this—I had kind of gotten a different impression when I was in Russia that what was going on in Chechnya and North and South Ossetia and everything else, the tremendous fear, almost a purge of any of the extremists, and they would go to any means, including a former terrorist leader that is now in charge of Chechnya.

Mr. BARFI. If he felt like that then he would support the rebels to try to end the war. Because the rebels, the Chechens of Jaish al-Muhajirin wal-Ansar are part of the radical opposition that came about just in the last 2 years. Early on you had more nationalist moderate means.

Mr. COOK. Absolutely. Okay, thank you. I yield.

Mr. POE. The gentleman yields back his time. I want to thank all of our panelists for being here.

Did you have another question?

Mr. SHERMAN. Only if you will indulge me.

Mr. POE. I will recognize the ranking member.

Mr. SHERMAN. We have seen Assad win some victories on the ground. Are you folks pretty convinced that Assad isn't going to win this thing? Mr. Smyth?

Mr. SMYTH. Well, these victories that you are actually watching, the recent ones, these are due to the Shia militias and the Iranian involvement.

Mr. SHERMAN. Well, that is one way to win.

Mr. SMYTH. But going back to will he win, we keep continuing this paradigm that one side is going to win over the other. And Syria is a multi-polar conflict. I am actually using—

Mr. SHERMAN. But the Assad family has been able to impose its will on all of Syria for a long time and they are making a little progress toward returning to that. Are you confident they can't put this Humpty Dumpty back together again?

Mr. SMYTH. Frankly, I don't think that they can. A lot of these advancements that they have made, they haven't been able to hold on to certain large tracts of territory.

Mr. SHERMAN. Does anybody on the panel have a different view? Anybody betting on Assad? Okay. I feel like a croupier.

Lebanon is an analogy here, but Lebanon went through a violent phase of its kaleidoscope. On a less violent stage now it is being affected by Syria. We saw some peace in Lebanon 5 years ago, 10 years ago, in spite of the fact that you didn't have one government in control equally of all the territory. You had different groups in control with their own militias. Sounds like a peaceable version of today's Syria. But one difference is, in Lebanon, whatever group lived in an area had control of the area. There was a certain fairness to their allocation of the territory.

In Syria, the Alawites are 15 percent and have traditionally had the whole country and today hold a big, big chunk of it. Can there be, what should I say, less violent status in Syria, some sort of acceptance of a militia controlled status quo in different regions, or does the fact that the Alawites own over half the pie and "deserve" only 15 percent mean that they have to keep fighting until it is over? Mr. Jenkins?

Mr. JENKINS. First of all, in sorting things out in Lebanon, the civil war went on for 15 years. So if we get into two or three decades, different scenarios open up after people exhaust themselves. And second, the fighting in Lebanon, while it was intense, did not achieve the intensity that the fighting in Syria has, nor did it produce the kind of displacement in terms of refugees and so on. And so while it is possible, I think that we will see consolidation of these enclaves that could lead to some sort of a stasis, and there

will continue to be pushing and shoving around the edges. But that may turn out to be, in the sense of a spectrum of poor outcomes, one of the least poor—that is, accepting the de facto partition of Syria into a kaleidoscope of enclaves and attempting to simply reduce both the internal violence and the potential spillover in terms of international terrorism that it would create.

Mr. POE. All right. I have another question. One last question. While this is taking place, all these countries that surround Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, are we going to see an influx into those countries of the groups that are in Syria whether they are on Assad's side or whether they are on the rebel side, are these militias going to move into these other countries?

Mr. SMYTH. I will speak for the Assad side. The Shia militia organizations are already based in Iraq. They already have political influence there. Lebanese Hezbollah is a very, very big player in Lebanon and essentially run the show in most cases.

Mr. POE. The Iranians want to take over the whole region.

Mr. SMYTH. Well, of course they do.

Mr. POE. And eliminate Israel in the process.

Mr. SMYTH. Well, that is one of the cores of their ideological structure.

Mr. POE. Okay. What about the other side? What about the folks fighting on the rebel side? Anybody want to weigh in on that? Mr. Barfi, I will let you answer that last question.

Mr. BARFI. Let us just take a quick look at Jordan. We know hundreds of Jordanians have gone. Some get caught, some end up dead and some are still there. This is a Zarqawi network. These are the same Salafi leaders that piped people into Iraq. They are now coming back. Look at Lebanon. This is one of the biggest bombings we have seen in years in Lebanon of the Iranian Embassy. I mean, you are already seeing this blowback. And we know there is a lot of Salafis. We know there is jihadists in Lebanon. They were there before. But you are getting now the blowback, and what are they going to do? They are going to take the war to the infidel, Shia Hezbollah in there, and in Jordan they may try to destabilize the regime. It is very, very bad this blowback and spillover.

Mr. POE. I want to thank all of you. Your testimony was excellent. Your written statements were excellent. So without objection, all members will have 5 days to submit statements, and there may be more questions that we would like for you to answer in writing, and extraneous materials for the record subject to the limitation in the rules. Thank you once again.

[Whereupon, at 4:10 p.m., the subcommittee was adjourned.]

A P P E N D I X

MATERIAL SUBMITTED FOR THE HEARING RECORD

SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING NOTICE
COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-6128

Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade
Ted Poe (R-TX), Chairman

TO: MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

You are respectfully requested to attend an OPEN hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, to be held by the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade in Room 2200 of the Rayburn House Office Building (and available live via the Committee website at <http://www.ForeignAffairs.house.gov>):

DATE: Wednesday, November 20, 2013

TIME: 2:00 p.m.

SUBJECT: Terrorist Groups in Syria

WITNESSES: Mr. Brian Michael Jenkins
Senior Adviser to the President
RAND Corporation

Mr. Phillip Smyth
Middle East Research Analyst
University of Maryland

Mr. Barak Barfi
Research Fellow
The New America Foundation

Mr. Andrew J. Tabler
Senior Fellow
The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

By Direction of the Chairman

The Committee on Foreign Affairs seeks to make its facilities accessible to persons with disabilities. If you are in need of special accommodations, please call 202/225-5021 at least four business days in advance of the event, whenever practicable. Questions with regard to special accommodations in general (including availability of Committee materials in alternative formats and assistive listening devices) may be directed to the Committee.



COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

MINUTES OF SUBCOMMITTEE ON Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade HEARING

Day Wednesday Date 11/20/13 Room 2172

Starting Time 2:55 p.m. Ending Time 4:10 p.m.

Recesses ☐ (to) (to) (to) (to) (to) (to)

Presiding Member(s)

Chairman Poe

Check all of the following that apply:

Open Session ☒

Executive (closed) Session ☐

Televised ☒

Electronically Recorded (taped) ☒

Stenographic Record ☒

TITLE OF HEARING:

Terrorist Groups in Syria

SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT:

Reps. Poe, Sherman, Schneider, Kinzinger, Brooks, Cotton, Cook, Yoho

NON-SUBCOMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT: (Mark with an * if they are not members of full committee.)

HEARING WITNESSES: Same as meeting notice attached? Yes ☒ No ☐

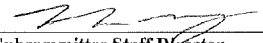
(If "no", please list below and include title, agency, department, or organization.)

STATEMENTS FOR THE RECORD: (List any statements submitted for the record.)

TIME SCHEDULED TO RECONVENE _____

or

TIME ADJOURNED 4:10 p.m.


Subcommittee Staff Director